This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

ELIJAH JOHN FISHER

MILES MARK FISHER

Digitized by Google

PROPERTY OF
The University of Michigan Libraries
1817
ARTES SCIENTIA VERITAS

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

THE MASTER'S SLAVE
ELIJAH JOHN FISHER

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

E. J. Fisher

Digitized by Google

THE MASTER'S SLAVE
ELIJAH JOHN FISHER

A BIOGRAPHY

By

HIS SON

MILES MARK FISHER

Pastor Zion Baptist Church, Racine, Wisconsin

Author of "Lott Cary"

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE

REV. LACEY KIRK WILLIAMS, D. D.

AND AN APPRECIATION BY THE

HON. MARTIN B. MADDEN

Sixty-sixth Congress

PHILADELPHIA

THE JUDSON PRESS

BOSTON CHICAGO ST. LOUIS LOS ANGELES

KANSAS CITY SEATTLE TORONTO

Digitized by Google

BX
6455
.F52
F53

Copyright, 1922, by
GILBERT N. BRINK, SECRETARY

Published June, 1922

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

Digitized by Google

520020 - C13

TO

My Mother

A VOICE FROM THE DARK

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

FOREWORD

In this day when so much is written about the Negro, so little is said concerning his church. Whatever advancement has been made by him must be laid largely at the door of those who lead his church. This brief sketch is designed to represent one minister highly typical of the great Negro Baptist denomination and to reflect, in a small way, the opinions of Negro Baptist leaders concerning the denomination during the last fifty years.

I express my thanks for the many suggestions and for much of the information herein contained to my many relatives, and to Mrs. L. Davis; Mr. A. Banks; the Rev. Lacey Kirk Williams, D. D.; the Rev. E. W. D. Isaac, D. D.; President John Hope, A. M., LL. D.; the Rev. Charles H. Young; the Rev. Edwin P. Johnson, D. D.; the Rev. Peter James Bryant, D. D.; and the Rev. Sutton E. Griggs, D. D. I also appreciate the helpfulness and encouragement given by the President and members of the faculty of the Northern Baptist Theological Seminary of Chicago. I am especially grateful to the Rev. Dr. Augustine S.

Digitized by Google

Carman and the Rev. Dean Shailer Mathews, who respectively critically read my manuscript and kindly advised me in this task of love.

I write, too, from the soul rather than to be heard of men. I write for him who left no trace of his sailing-self, save rippling waves and sheets upon the surface strewn, which I caught up. I write that young men everywhere might court a friendship not in vain, that older seers who conquered pain might glory in the young men's gains, I write. I write from promptings, big and great, for hearts of friends and for mine that aches.

And then, the last song
When the dead man is praised on his journey—' Bear, bear him along
With his few faults shut up like dead flowerets! Are balm-seeds not here
To console us? The land has none left such as he on the bier.
Oh would we might keep thee, my brother! '—*Browning.*

M. M. F.

CHICAGO, DECEMBER 25, 1921.

Digitized by Google

INTRODUCTION

The study of the past, one element of history, is a guide in forecasting the future. On the one hand it is a caution, and on the other an inspiration. History is the truest biography, or biography is the truest history. The lives of men filling sacred or ecclesiastical positions have been the richest heritage of historians. Secular and sacred history would be void of much of its luster and potentiality, if it did not give the achievements of Luther, Calvin, Chrysostom, Wesley, Spurgeon, and many other illustrious church characters.

Our race group and our churches must tarry here long enough to learn the value of this subject and the importance of the biographer's pen. That it is "mightier than the sword" applies here with more force and aptness than elsewhere. Deeply stirred by this fact, the author of this volume presents to the world the biography of the lamented Rev. E. J. Fisher, D. D.

Now, reader, pause just a moment before you begin the perusal of the remarkably interesting pages of this volume. This book is a good deed. It deals with

Digitized by Google

the life and the achievements of a masterful character: a preacher of the last generation of slaves, and one that clearly illustrated the possibilities of his race and the all-conquering power of God's grace.

He, the late Rev. E. J. Fisher, D. D., was one of nature's noblemen. He was blessed with an imposing physique and a commanding presence. He possessed a strong personality, was always moved by deep convictions and by purposes that were constant and captivating. He loved humanity with a deathless, pulsating devotion because he first loved God. His love was not of the sentimental, evanescent type, but was crystallized and expressed in altruistic services which yet live to accentuate his memory.

Whatever may die or be forgot,
Work done for God, it dieth not.

This volume written by M. M. Fisher, a young theologue, and the son of the Dr. E. J. Fisher, is convincing evidence of the substantial worth of the labors of his father, the slave, the freeman, the "ambassador of Christ," sailing in "turbulent seas," but bringing into "calm harbors" at last his most valuable cargoes.

The book is written with a facile pen and in a charming style, and will, if read understandingly, be

Digitized by Google

an abiding inspiration to Christian workers and ministers, "Knights of the Cross," "the slaves of Christ Jesus." It shows plainly what God can do with man's resources when these are fully surrendered to him.

It is history, biography, having a setting and a subject which alone are interesting. But the clearness and general style of this author, his keen insight, and his apt, faithful compilation of many scattered, tragic facts, and his skilful interpretations of these increase marvelously the interest and value of this life of the Master's slave.

It is the pathetic story of an earnest, patriotic pastor, beset here and there by unusual difficulties—but he battles with them and converts them into stepping-stones by which he "mounts the zenith," leading with him innumerable hosts from the world's plains and its miasmic lowlands. He was no creature of environments. He followed not "the line of least resistance," but being a man of courage, he rightfully has his place with those of whom Dryden discoursed when he said:

> The brave man seeks not popular applause,
> Nor, overpower'd with arms, deserts his cause;
> Unsham'd, though foil'd, he does the best he can.

Doctor Fisher wrought well. The present harmony and progress of Olivet are eloquent and convincing

Digitized by Google

testimony of his useful life and labors. Here "he being dead yet speaketh."

We pray that God's choicest blessings will rest upon the book, give it a wide and ready circulation, and thereby help to verify the promise of God,

"He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

L. K. WILLIAMS,
Pastor Olivet Baptist Church,
Chicago, Illinois.

Digitized by Google

AN APPRECIATION

That poverty, obscurity, and lowly birth are no handicap is frequently evidenced in the later development and conspicuous achievements of men. Affluence and opportunity do not insure leadership. Poverty is not always a guaranty that those who live in its surroundings will reach conspicuous heights, but there is greater incentive for those who have all to gain and nothing to lose to exert themselves than is the case with those who are supplied with everything which money and comfort afford. A fixed purpose in life, integrity, morality, industry, truthfulness, and determination are among the elements necessary to success. It does not matter that those who possess these elements are handicapped either by lack of opportunity or wealth or influence. Success comes to those who are determined to achieve it and have but one object and that object the fulfilment of an ambition, and who work toward it unceasingly and will not be diverted from that ambition by any obstacle. Obstacles to such men are but added incentives to success. They bring out the best there is in a man. Comfort and pleasure and luxurious sur-

Digitized by Google

roundings are not calculated to encourage the determination of individuals. Those who live under such circumstances move along the lines of least resistance. The great men of the world have come from the poor and lowly. They have achieved success because they have had the will to work. They have overcome opposition because they have learned the art of work. Work is an essential element to any success sought to be attained. The idle individual never overcomes obstacles. He shrinks from the effort which the obstacles make necessary, but the worker sees only the goal to which he aspires and he has no fear of failure. He knows that if he succeeds he must run the gauntlet; that his success is dependent upon the display of a better genius than that possessed by his contender. He allows nothing to discourage him as he passes along the journey of life. He does what he starts out to do, because he has made up his mind to do it. He grows step by step, through his untiring efforts, into the broader spheres of activity. His stature expands to meet the greater responsibilities. He enjoys the inspiration of the achievement to which he looks forward. Having achieved, he begins to work to a higher level, and while moving forward to the higher level he continues to enjoy in anticipation the next achievement,

Digitized by Google

and so life with him becomes one continuous joy as he moves from one level to another. He does not rest satisfied with what he has done, but continues onward and upward until his work is finally accomplished.

There is no better illustration of this than the success achieved by my late, dearly beloved friend, Elijah John Fisher, born in slavery and further handicapped by the loss of a leg which forced him to pass through life on crutches. He, nevertheless, became one of the leading men of his time. Loved by all with whom he came in contact, not only for himself, but for his work in which he was regarded by all who knew him as foremost among his associates; a great orator whose words rang with eloquence and whose patriotism knew no turning, whose life was devoted to the upbuilding of his race, whose word was law with his congregation and his people, he established a great church, surrounding himself with a happy and contented multitude of people, with whom his word was supreme.

It was a delight to know this man; to realize that out of slavery he worked his way to the forefront among the great divines of the nation. It is a great comfort now to look back upon his life and to realize that, though he has passed from the scene of activity,

Digitized by Google

his work still lives on and his memory continues to be honored and revered by those who knew him. His example may well be emulated, for no man I have ever known was more worthy of a place in the hearts and minds of a people than he. He was my friend; I was his. While he loved his people as a race, there was no race prejudice in him. He was a typical example of a true American whose every act was for the promotion of a better life among the human race, better conditions in the home, and better opportunities in the nation for all who might choose to embrace them. His, in fact, was a work which was calculated to make the country better, friends dearer, and home brighter. His memory will live and his work endure as one more evidence of what it is possible for an individual to achieve whose mind runs in the right direction.

It is a pity that men like Doctor Fisher could not continue to live on, but that, of course, is not in accordance with the plan of the Omnipotent Ruler of the universe. We come, we do our work, and we pass on to receive our reward.

As a leader of men Doctor Fisher was always foremost in every movement for the advancement of the human race. We all mourn his passing from the scene of activity; and yet there is no reason why we should

Digitized by Google

mourn his death, because it is just as natural to die as it is to live; and rather should we rejoice that God gave him life that others might profit by his example. His was a life of noble deeds and personal sacrifices in behalf of his people. His ambition was to see them elevated to a plane of higher usefulness. He worked to prepare their minds, hearts, and souls for the acceptance of the blessings which the God of our fathers continues to bestow on his children who are ready and willing to receive them.

Doctor Fisher's life was one continual song of praise. He radiated happiness everywhere. His friends will always be happy in the knowledge that while he lived he sowed the seed of virtue, patriotism, peace, happiness, and good-will among men, which will continue to bear fruit for all time. It is a consolation to know that the world is better for Doctor Fisher having lived and that his separation from us is but temporary.

MARTIN B. MADDEN,
Congressman from Illinois.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Bound and Branded, 1858-1879	1
II.	Loosed on the Swan Road, 1879-1889	17
III.	Sailing Due North, 1889-1901	31
IV.	At the Coaling-station, 1901-1903	47
V.	The Storm, 1903-1904	61
VI.	The Calm, 1904-1910	85
VII.	On Unknown Seas, 1910-1912	109
VIII.	Precious Cargoes from Many Ports, 1912-1915	131
IX.	Into the Harbor, 1915	151
	Appendix, Olivet Baptist Church, 1915-1922	173

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
E. J. Fisher ..... *Frontispiece*	
Florida Fisher	14
Mount Olive Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia	34
The Spruce Street Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee	52
Young Girls Missionary Circle, Olivet Baptist Church	92
Grow! Grow! Grow! Kindergarten Children Getting their Daily Milk	100
Elijah John Fisher, at Sea	112
Kindergarten, Olivet Baptist Church	120
Kindergarten Closing, Elizabeth McCormick Fund Exhibit	128
A Group of Workers of the Bethlehem Association	136
Children of the Kindergarten in the Olivet Bus	142
Elijah John Fisher	148
Home Care of the Sick Class, Olivet Baptist Church	158
Boy Scouts, Olivet Baptist Church	168
Lacey Kirk Williams, D. D., Pastor, Olivet Baptist Church, Chicago	176
Marching from Olivet to the First Church	180
The Olivet Baptist Church, Thirty-first Street and South Park Avenue, Chicago	188

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

I

BOUND AND BRANDED

1858-1879

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

BOUND AND BRANDED

1858-1879

Slavery was the rule in beautiful La Grange, a small town, among the red-clay hills of Georgia. Dr. Robert Ridley, a physician, tall and gray and stern, was master of cotton-fields and human souls. Guardian magnolias stood watch over his colonial dwelling, which, offset by an escarpment of white rocks, was strikingly contrasted to the dilapidated habitations of slave men treading their mournful way from the cradle to the grave. A gulley worn by the weeping of high heaven for a fettered race, and meandering gently from yonder hill, served the purposes of drainage and walk to the mud-chinked cabins along "slave row," where the household of "Fisher" lived. The hut was of two rooms, bedecked without with trellised primroses and within with whitewash. Its only aperture was a door of logs, cut in halves, swung on leather hinges, which served also as chimney and window. In such a place seventeen children and their parents lived. Elijah John was next to the youngest of eight boys. He was born August 2, 1858.

His mother, Charlotte, was a typical slave parent, giving birth to twenty-one children. She was a large brown woman, fully six feet tall, and was formerly

Digitized by Google

owned by Balton Amos, a young master, who, when his wife died, gave her as property to his friend, Doctor Ridley. Her eyes were small, deep set, overshadowed by narrow eyebrows, arched and black; her cheek-bones were high and prominent, and her mouth was characteristic of her posterity. She could neither read nor write, but knew instinctively happy truths. She "walked with God" hourly, and at any religious service she would shout, "I'm pure gold tried in the fire." She worked incessantly in the field, humming, singing, or shouting a melody, only stopping intermittently to croon the plaintive lullaby to her accompanying young:

Going to tell Aunt Tabby,
Going to tell Aunt Tabby,
Old gray goose is dead.

Her mate, Miles, was also the property of Doctor Ridley through purchase from Mr. Fisher, of Virginia. He had been purchased for his skill as a carpenter and was generally considered a good workman. He was a stately, broad, smooth black, a complement to her character. He, however, was a sort of lay preacher and had named most of his family after Bible characters about whom he had heard or read time and again. He was kind, earnest, and faithful, the spokesman for the slaves and a "trusty" on the plantation.

There is no reliable knowledge of other forebears beyond perhaps the grandparents. The cause of this

Digitized by Google

is well known. Many slaveholders kept the ancestral records of certain breeds of live stock but never that of slaves, primarily because the worth of a slave depended less upon the blood of his forebears than did the price of stock upon the animal's pedigree.

Nevertheless, Mr. Fisher delighted to trace his ancestry to a tribe of Zulus in Africa over which one of his kin was chieftain. We may be sure, however, of his parentage while a member of Doctor Ridley's household. Charlotte's father, Markus, married Nancy "Amos" (the master's name), the daughter of Hannah whose father was a Creek Indian with African blood.

According to the customs of slavery Miles got the consent of Doctor Ridley to marry Charlotte. His acquiescence was equivalent to license and ceremony. True enough, such a union was not a creation of law, but it served its purpose in those days better than wedding-bells and statutory enactments do in most cases today. However, Miles believed in ceremony, so he and Charlotte "jumped" several times back and forth over a broom repeating, "I marry you."

Thus they were married. For over a score of years they lived in the hut beside the gully of tears, lightening each other's sorrows. Strivings, hopes, and prayers were their consolation. Children were born. Should they, too, forever be slaves? God forbid!

At this very time, contention and protestation by such persons as Garrison, Lundy, Lovejoy, and

Digitized by Google

Phillips against a system which was gnawing at the vitals of home and society was at its height. In the halls of Congress, Charles Sumner made the air electric with anti-slavery sentiment. Greatly influenced by the preaching of Henry Ward Beecher, religious organizations throughout the world were never more zealous than in the crusade against the pernicious bargaining for human flesh. Long before his presidency, this evil had come to the attention of the great Lincoln. The exigencies of civil strife, brought to a climax by the defeat of General Lee at Antietam, broke the spell of the devil-nurtured system of slavery. Abraham Lincoln spoke, and the subject of this sketch was one among the four millions of a race which was forever thereafter to be recognized as human.

The story of freedom became a sweet memory in the life of Elijah. The Northern soldiers came through the South, plundering and pillaging the plantations of the slaveholders and announcing to the slaves their freedom. To ward off plundering, the owner of the plantation would hang up a white sign (usually a sheet), signifying that his intention toward the slave was good and that the announcement of freedom could be made at any time.

It was the summer of 1863 when the Yankees reached the plantation of Doctor Ridley. The day was still and hot. There was not a cloud to obstruct the vision of the azure heavens. The leaves on the trees stood motionless. Zephyrus was asleep. The

Digitized by Google

slaves were in the fields chopping the cotton and chanting the rhythm of the day as a testimony to the drowsy overseer that they were doing his bidding. " Massah " Ridley was on the porch of the " big house " fast asleep. The Yankees had ridden up to the mansion, and the horses put their hoofs on the low and unrailed porch as if at home. Doctor Ridley awakened quickly, surprised, startled, bewildered, perplexed, a riot of color. Some words passed between the parties, and then one of the soldiers took something from his pocket and read it. By this time " Missus " Ridley had come from the house. She too heard the story and saw her husband's eyes suffused with tears, but said not a word. Doctor Ridley was trying hard to keep the tears back. He summoned Miles and spoke slowly with a tear in his voice:

" Miles, call all the niggers together."

The slaves did not know the meaning of Miles' news to them, although they had heard rumors that they should sometime be free. Few could read, and none had access to newspapers. As they left the field they wondered who was to be whipped or who was to be sold or what orders were to be given. Half-startled, half-afraid, they wended their way through the fields in one silent mass of praying creatures. On seeing the Yankees they started back, but " Massah " Ridley beckoned.

The master was weeping bitterly. Finally he sobbed, " I called you together, Miles——" then he

Digitized by Google

stopped. His words were stifled with sobs. The slaves were awe-stricken; they had never seen a white man cry. Only slaves had tears, they thought. All eyes were fastened on Doctor Ridley. He was saying something. "All you niggers—all you niggers are free as I am." The surprise was shocking, but in an instant in his usual harsh voice he added:

"But there ain't going to be any rejoicing here. Stay here until the crop is made, and I'll give you provisions. Go back to work."

But the slaves did rejoice and loudly, too. Some cried; some jumped up and cracked their heels. Charlotte took her younger children in her arms and shouted all over the plantation:

"Chillun, didn't I tell you God 'ould answer prayer?"

There is hardly any way to make real the almost unbelievable announcement of freedom. Many of the freedmen immediately left the plantation; others stayed and worked until they were materially able to earn a livelihood. Miles and Charlotte were among this last group.

They did make one change, however. All of their relatives took for their surname, Amos; and Miles and Charlotte would have taken Ridley, but their former master was so heartless that they assumed the surname Fisher, after Miles' Virginia master.

Miles and Charlotte worked for Doctor Ridley until the summer of 1864 when they began life anew on a

Digitized by Google

farm of forty-eight acres, upon which they had made an initial payment to their former master. They continued devout Christians, bringing up their children in the fear of the Lord. Religion was as much intuitive to the slave as Christianity was to Miles. He often supplied the First Baptist Church of La Grange as minister. He was not an eloquent or learned man, and when he preached the attendance was usually small. Probably he never preached from the rostrum, but as a "floor preacher" he presented the story of the Cross as best he could.

The colored congregation at La Grange was peculiar for one thing—no licentiate was allowed on the rostrum, and this attitude accounted for "floor preachers." They had no church house of their own, but met in the white church after morning worship; there were no night services. In the summertime, the Negro members of the First Baptist Church met in the soldiers' graveyard under a "brush arbor" made by suspending beams across the aisle of trees and strewing the tops with pine boughs.

"Floor preaching" was embarrassing, but it did not check the zeal of Miles for souls. He continued his life of farming through the week, preaching when he could.

His life had a direct Christian bearing upon his family, for he began at home the lessons which he preached abroad. As a result, all of his children accepted Christ at an early age.

Digitized by Google

During slavery, Elijah John was hired by his master to the Reverend Abner R. Callaway, as a companion to his crippled son, Sumner, who was three years the senior of Elijah. They, unaware of the distinctions of caste and color taught by parents, played together and strove just as all children do in the feverish pranks of boys. Sumner knew many Bible stories and took great delight in telling them to his little mate. These messages of light had a beneficent effect upon Elijah for, after Sumner passed into the kingdom of childlike innocence, and after Elijah subsequently returned to Master Ridley, Elijah John said that he loved Sumner's Master and voluntarily accepted his brand. He gave evidence of being converted.

Undoubtedly, there was a value in the early religious instruction of Elijah. Nevertheless, many older Christians could not quite realize that a person so young could endure the brand of an exacting Master, and it was a much discussed question as to whether Elijah John should become one of the flock or remain a maverick. If the brand of divine truth was not yet impressed on Elijah's heart, certainly it was laid on the surface so that the Spirit had only to press it down to make it at once the emblem of new life. Accordingly, he was baptized, October 19, 1863, by the Reverend Abner R. Callaway, into the fellowship of the La Grange church, of which Dr. David Benedict, the Baptist historian, said, "This is one of the most efficient churches in western Georgia."

Digitized by Google

Elijah John Fisher demonstrated his profession by the life he lived from childhood. He is said to have shown propensities for the calling both of minister and undertaker in these early days. Whenever any animal would die on the farm, Elijah would lead the boys out to a little service and then inter the carcass. Deacon Marchman of the First Colored Baptist Church of La Grange, who grew up with Elijah from earliest boyhood, says:

"Fisher served his parents well. He was a consistent Christian boy. I never knew him to do anything wrong. When we fellows would go to a dance, Fisher wouldn't dance. He never used tobacco and was bitterly opposed to whisky."

By 1874, Miles paid the last dollar on his farm, which had furnished a home for his wife, Charlotte, his seventeen children, and his sisters-in-law, Jane and Sissey. Just when he was able to rest from his labors, he was taken ill, and in the spring of 1875 he died.

There was one request that Miles made on his death-bed, after he had called his family around him, and that was for Elijah to take care of Charlotte and the farm. Although Elijah was only seventeen years old, he had shown ability in dealing with the business of the farm. Each child had an equal portion of the farm for his inheritance, and all were to contribute to the support of their mother and her sisters.

However, farm life appealed less and less to all except Elijah. He contracted to buy the inheritances

Digitized by Google

of the other children and assumed the care of his mother. He was able the first year to raise four or five bales of cotton and several hundred bushels of corn and potatoes. During the winter months and after the planting season, he had an opportunity to attend a school conducted by Mr. Danny McGee, one of the many slave Negroes who had learned to read and to write because of intimate association in the house of the slave owner.

The schoolhouse was a dilapidated log hut, past usefulness as a cabin, with one door and no windows. The logs stretched in front of the hearth served as both seats and desks. Here Professor McGee—yes, "Fessor," because any one who knew anything was termed professor and the misnomer has become traditional in all Negro schools—was master. Mr. McGee charged each student a dollar a month for tuition and in turn dispensed "mathematics, science, and philosophy" found in the famous old "Blue-back Speller." Elijah stayed one month at this school, but urgent work needed on the farm brought his educational career speedily to a close.

After planting season, he went back to school for another month. Mr. Tolston, a Christian white man, who along with others enlisted in a missionary enterprise which meant only hard work, prejudice, and ostracism to themselves, but which inspired the Negro to noble attainments in art, science, invention, literature, and religion, was teacher. At this school Elijah

Digitized by Google

made marked progress and could spell readily the dissyllable l-a (lay), d-y (dee), lady.

Unwittingly, the Reverend Anthony Williams, the Negro pastor of the First Colored Baptist Church, made a slighting remark concerning Miles as a "floor preacher." This greatly fired the passion of Miles' son, Henry, who was leader of the choir, and on Monday he and Miles II met Pastor Williams and thrashed him sorely. They were apprehended and to save them from prison, Elijah had to forfeit all of his cotton, corn, and potatoes as a penalty for their misdemeanor.

This incident was discouraging to Elijah. He had nothing to go upon for that year. Immediately, he bargained to sell the farm and in 1876 made the sale to Mr. B. Edmondson. Mr. Fisher thereupon sought employment in Anniston, Alabama, a mining-town about forty-five miles distant.

Setting out on foot one Sunday morning, he arrived in Anniston on Tuesday and much to his delight found employment in the coal-mines at fifty cents a day. Elijah was just nineteen years old, but was large for his age. He was tall and robust, and as he walked the streets he carried himself as erect as a soldier and as proudly as a peacock. It was often remarked that Elijah was the proudest Negro that walked the streets of La Grange, Georgia, or Anniston, Alabama.

Previous to his employment in Anniston, Elijah, in 1875, met a maid of sixteen summers who charmed

Digitized by Google

him as did no one else. Florida Neely was a copper-colored girl with jet-black hair and pronounced features, embracing characteristics which were decidedly Indian, Caucasian, and Negro.

The Neely family had come to La Grange from Randolph County, Alabama, when Florida was eight years old. Until she reached her twelfth birthday she had worked in the field for Mr. Thompson, first carrying water and then hoeing. Afterward, she worked in the home of Colonel Charles Maibrie as servant and, being quick to learn, began knitting for five dollars a month. Florida did this for three years, after which time she received an increase of a dollar a month. It was while working there as a knitter that she met Elijah Fisher.

Florida Neely was an inspiration from the start to Mr. Fisher. He would walk to Anniston each month and walk back to see his fiancée. She described his jaunts in later life, remarking that on every trip his feet would be blistered and that often she assisted him in washing them and greasing them with mutton-suet.

While in Anniston, Mr. Fisher and Miss Neely corresponded freely, although both had not had three month's schooling combined. Mr. Fisher's foreman and Miss Neely's mistress wrote the love-letters of their employees, and though it took each party a long time to decipher the messages, the missives had their effect. On September 25, 1877, Elijah John Fisher and Florida Neely were married at the First Baptist

Digitized by Google

Florida Fisher

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Church of La Grange, Georgia, by the Reverend Martin E. Hardin.

The night of the marriage ceremony was full of uncommon happenings that might interest the reader. Pink, Elijah's sister, was engaged to Mr. Edward McFarland and had planned to have her wedding one hour earlier than the Neely-Fisher ceremony. At the church Miss Neely learned that Miss Pink Fisher had not married and that she was waiting to have a double wedding. All was ready and the church was there in full to witness the ceremony. Miss Fisher had no bridesmaids and so the wonderful advantage of "Two-in-One" was discovered. Florida's bridesmaids went in first, then Pink and Mr. McFarland and Florida and Mr. Fisher. The people were surprised that Florida Neely had no bridesmaids. Truly "things are not always what they seem," and to add to the embarrassment all the bridal party went to Florida Fisher's house for dinner.

Mr. and Mrs. Fisher continued their home in La Grange although he worked in the mines six months longer.

Anniston was becoming more and more civilized. During the first days of Mr. Fisher's employment, Anniston was a typical mining-town. Lewd women and liquor were the rule. It was rumored that few respectable women lived in the town. Mr. Fisher carried himself in such a way as to gain the respect of all with whom he came in contact.

Digitized by Google

As Anniston emerged into the light of culture, many prominent families moved there, and Mr. Fisher's character and manliness attracted the attention of the leading white citizens. Colonel A. T. Tyler gave him employment in his residence as butler. This position in a home where men of clean estate walked on downy carpets, was quite a contrast to the darkness of the mines where dust and dirt and floors of hardened earth were the surroundings of a grim mass of humanity. Mr. Fisher toiled for Colonel Tyler nearly a year.

During the dull season he studied grammar and arithmetic under Dr. J. T. Roberts and Dr. D. Shaver at the Atlanta Baptist Seminary. While at this school, where the atmosphere had the savor of religious fervor, his call to preach was made clear. However, he returned to Anniston to resume his former work. He had been licensed to preach, in 1879, by his church in La Grange, but he did not want to do the job. He tried to suppress the Spirit's call by teaching a country school.

Finding out that his school was growing, he finally gave himself solely to teaching. From each child he received ten cents a month, and this sum with his salary and with what his thrifty wife received was enough for their upkeep.

Digitized by Google

II

LOOSED ON THE SWAN ROAD

1879-1889

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

LOOSED ON THE SWAN ROAD

1879-1889

Mr. Fisher resolved to become an educated man; his wife had no objection. She was working at what then seemed a splendid position, making six dollars a month, and out of that sum had saved over a hundred dollars. Mr. Fisher had saved more. Before leaving for school, Mrs. Fisher requested him to put their money in the bank. This he did but in his own name. When his wife went to draw seventy-five dollars to purchase three-fourths of an acre for her mother, she found that no money could be drawn without her husband's signature. Thereupon, she wrote him in Atlanta for his permission to make the withdrawal.

In the meantime, he had been solicited for a school at Long Cane, Georgia, and this was a good opportunity to go and make arrangements. The agent for the property suggested that since Mr. Fisher was home, it would be better for him to complete the transaction with Colonel Blum. Mr. Fisher desired to pay only half down for the lot and planned to make a payment toward the building of a house with the other half. All the framework of the building was constructed by the first of April, and Mr. Fisher went on top to put on the roof.

Digitized by Google

His wife saw him thus working and exclaimed in her consternation, "Don't you know that it is bad luck to work on your own house?"

Superstition still had sway. Luck, its protegé, was swaying the destinies of ex-slaves and freemen and, as Cardinal Mazarin and Rothschild seem to think, is the guiding star of worldly success and sways the destinies of men of all rank.

Mrs. Fisher was no exception to the use of this euphemism for every act of divine Providence.

On April 3, 1880, Mr. Fisher boarded the Atlanta and West Point train for Long Cane to make final arrangements for his school and to preach in West Point on Sunday. He reached Long Cane and made all arrangements to teach the school and intended to catch the train in the afternoon. At such a town as Long Cane, trains "stop on signal only" and then stop still only for women. He was staying in the Negro settlement near the swirl and smoke of the noisy railroad. When he heard the blowing whistle of the train, with valise in one hand and light coat over the other that held an umbrella, he set out in a hurry for the depot. The engineer saw him, but since he was a man, and a black one at that, the train simply slowed up enough to let the only passenger aboard.

As Mr. Fisher got on to the step, his overcoat caught, and the moving monster threw him on the track. He thought to raise his right leg thereby saving it from being severed. But it is strange how the train acted as

Digitized by Google

a skilled surgeon, amputating his left leg about a foot above the knee, also his second toe on his right foot and his third finger on his right hand; and it is stranger still how Mr. Fisher lived through the suffering and agony of such a misfortune, from Long Cane to West Point, a distance of ten miles. There he received medical attention and, without anesthetics, allowed his leg to be cut farther up and his other wounds to be dressed.

The crisis had come. What was he to do? The Negro was not a man in the South, therefore a suit against the company would have been futile. No Negro lawyer dared take such a case, and all white lawyers wouldn't. Should he get well, was there anything a one-legged Negro could do? What of his wife?

Such an accident would have dampened the ardor of most men, especially young ones, but not so with men who do the things immortal. Marvelous have been the endeavors of near-sighted Paul; of the blind Milton and "Blind Tom"; of frail Channing; of club-foot Byron; of the frail youth Roosevelt; of the consumptive Keats and Paul Laurence Dunbar; of lame Talleyrand; of hunchback Pope; of diseased Johnson, and epileptic Julius Cæsar. Many a being has found in his misfortune, as Bacon long ago said, "a perpetual spur to rescue and deliver him from scorn." It is not to be denied with Shakespeare that

> It is not in our stars,
> But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

Digitized by Google

The news of the accident was wired to his mother and mother-in-law, but not to his wife, for she was soon to be a mother. Groups could be seen over La Grange talking about the terrible happening at Long Cane. Mrs. Fisher felt that something was wrong.

"I could not sleep Saturday night," she said. "In the wee hours of the night I was disturbed in a dream. I saw Mr. Fisher lying on a gray dray, and blood was dripping on the ground. I immediately awakened and went to Aunt Sally (no relation, but a usual form of salutation) the next morning."

On seeing Florida, Aunt Sally began: "Child, I had a dream about you last night. Somethin's going to happen."

Trying to forestall the interpreter, Mrs. Fisher replied, "Oh, no, Aunt Sally!"

The thought haunted both, and as Florida went to prepare breakfast she was perturbed with the fear that Mr. Fisher was harmed but hoped for the best. She tried as best she could to efface the last vestiges of superstition, but, as with people of our day, there was a dread of having the ante-bellum Negro prophesy ill-fortune, for invariably bad results seem to follow.

The day passed as usual. At supper the news had reached Mrs. Maibrie—still Mrs. Fisher did not know. Mrs. Maibrie had intimated that on tomorrow Florida had better take down her curtains and give her room a thorough cleaning, the mistress thinking that Mr. Fisher would be brought home. Then, too, there

Digitized by Google

was a peculiar look on the faces of all the servants at supper. All of this added to Florida's suspicion.

Monday after breakfast as she was taking down the curtains she looked around and saw her mother in the doorway crying. The message was broken gently, but poor Florida fainted. She was several days gaining her strength, but as soon as possible was on her way to West Point to see her husband.

At this juncture friends were needed. Mr. Fisher had so lived that both white and colored saw to it that he and his wife should not need. Gertrude Lillian was born six weeks later, May 16, 1880, and at that time Mr. Fisher was able to get around. The future left little hope for his mate and himself.

"Suppose, Florida, you go to your folks and I to mine," he said.

"Mr. Fisher [for that is what she always called him], if I have a crust of bread, one-half shall be yours."

There is a bit of philosophy in this simplicity of love. It was not as lyric as the great love scenes recorded by sacred and profane writers, but it was as genuine and as warm as any heart-throbs that pulsated between Damon and Pythias, Jonathan and David, and Ruth and Naomi. Elijah John Fisher was a brave man struggling in the storm of that inexorable Spirit which sways the destinies of both gods and men.

Life had to be started over again. Florida secured a position as a washerwoman, and Elijah was

Digitized by Google

allowed to teach in one of the county schools of La Grange.

Every Monday friends would come after him in a buggy and take him across La Grange to the West Side where he taught. He stayed at the residence of Mrs. Gordon, formerly a slave of the well-known General Gordon, on Hamilton Road, and had the pleasure of teaching all of her children. During these days (on April 11, 1881), Miss Sophia B. Packard and Miss Harriet E. Giles had come from Boston, Massachusetts, under a commission from the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society, and had established a school, known today as Spelman Seminary, for the elevation of Negro girls and women, in the basement of the Friendship Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia. They were offering free education to deserving girls that could be recommended. Mr. Fisher recommended Nora Gordon from his school who, when she completed her course at Spelman Seminary, sailed in 1889, with Miss Clara Howard, as a missionary to Africa.

The school of Mr. Fisher was above the average and paid fifty dollars a month. The session lasted only through the months of June, July, and August when the pupils were less needed on the farms. In addition to the salary paid by the county, each pupil paid ten cents a month. A good livelihood could thereby be gotten, since his pupils numbered at least seventy-five.

Digitized by Google

The colored people of La Grange thought the term of the school too short, so they extended it and supported the principal five months longer. This Independent School, as it was called, met for its extra session in the colored Baptist church. As in the county school, each pupil was supposed to bring ten cents a month; many increased their tuition to twenty-five cents. The school grew to such large proportions that an assistant teacher, Miss Salena Sloan (now Mrs. H. R. Butler), had to be employed, and the name was subsequently changed to the La Grange Baptist Seminary. Mr. Fisher remained principal during most of his residence in La Grange, until, at least, other duties drew too heavily upon his time. The Seminary is today one of the two colored city schools of La Grange and has ever been guided by an alumnus of the Atlanta Baptist Seminary (now Morehouse College).

Through it all, Mr. Fisher began to reflect seriously upon the accident. People were saying by the life he was living that he was certainly a good Christian. But why should he be so afflicted? This query is the riddle of the ages, only partially answered by the tale of the nations. God has a work for men and nations to perform, and when they refuse he breaks them on the wheel, but his work must go on. Elijah John Fisher resigned his will to God. He desired to do his biddings; it was his duty to do his work. He conducted prayer services in the neighboring villages. His voice in song was indicative of other gifts within. Men

Digitized by Google

and women were called to the ranks of service by the gospel of his singing. He knew full well that it was not in his power to convert, but that he was used of Jehovah. More and more did he desire to devote his entire time to such endeavors.

Mr. Fisher's first church was in the country at Threats Grove, Troup County, Troup Factory, Georgia. The members would come after him in a buggy every Saturday, and he with them would journey to the settlement some seven miles distant. This congregation was unable to pay very much money, but the abundance of corn, potatoes, chickens, butter, and syrup insured him a good living.

With very little preparation and physically handicapped, Mr. Fisher stepped from the butlery to the schoolroom, from the schoolroom to the pulpit, from the humblest to the highest pursuits, and was ordained, May 10, 1882, by Rev. E. R. Carter, Rev. C. T. Walker, Rev. D. J. Wimbish, Rev. J. A. Walker, and Rev. P. M. Mobley.

According to the times, a good shepherd was always the overseer of from two to six churches which he visited in their turn. It is interesting to note the contempory churches which Pastor Fisher served.

Macedonia Baptist Church was located about four miles from La Grange on land that had belonged to Doctor Ridley. He remained there two years, adding ninety-five souls to the membership and building them a substantial house of worship.

Digitized by Google

At the same time, he was pastor of the Mount Zion Baptist Church, Whitefield Crossing, now Louise, Georgia. Mount Zion was considered a good church with about a hundred members who were able to pay their pastor the fabulous sum of three hundred dollars a year.

His family had increased during these days to four: Gertrude Lillian, Shepherd Mattie, Elijah John, Jr., and James Edward. His wife thought it a pity that he should play the role of a mere exhorter. Her conception of a minister was based largely on the preaching she had heard at the First Colored Baptist Church in La Grange. There the minister would momentarily disappear behind the pulpit and spring up spasmodically, shouting some sort of unintelligible whoop which would throw his mourners into pandemonium. Such tactics had contributed largely to the formation of a colored Baptist church in the town as a necessary move by the white people to get rid of that frenzied worship. Accordingly, in the early years of her husband's ministry, Mrs. Fisher did not go to hear him preach, but stayed at home and admonished him against being a "jack-legged" preacher.

Such admonition had its effect. Pastor Fisher also believed that representatives of the highest moral and spiritual affairs should personify the noblest character and the highest intellectuality. He believed, further, that the more unprepared the people the more prepared ought to be their leaders. But he also believed that a

Digitized by Google

religion that could not be felt was no religion and a discourse that appealed only to the intellect and did not pull on the heart-strings was not a sermon.

He was signally honored by being chosen Assistant Secretary of the Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia, and Moderator of the Western Union Association in its twelfth annual session at Grantville, Georgia, in 1885. During his administration, a Sunday School Convention was organized and made auxiliary to the parent body; the La Grange Baptist Seminary was supported. His work for his term of office, which was two years, contributed largely to his future success.

Soon, it became a matter of observation that the churches that secured the services of Mr. Fisher were beginning to enjoy a degree of prosperity unprecedented. His ministry was the theme of general comment all through North Georgia. God was with him and through him was doing a good work.

In the autumn of 1883 he was also called to the pastorate of the First Baptist Church, Anniston, Alabama. He resigned the churches at Threats Grove and Macedonia, but the Mount Zion Church at Whitefield Crossing would not accept his resignation. The members there clung to him as pastor, although he preached for them only one Sunday in each month. He also built a church house for them.

He found the people of Anniston laboring under a heavy debt which he completely liquidated. Accord-

Digitized by Google

ing to Dr. E. R. Carter, in "Our Pulpit Illustrated," he solicited in two years' time over forty thousand dollars for a new church home. He was elected President of the Sunday School Convention of Northeast Alabama and Moderator of the Rushing Spring Association of the same State. During all of these early pastorates he lived in La Grange, Georgia.

An incident out of the ordinary happened in that city. He was called to the pastorate of the First Colored Baptist Church, of which he had been a member twenty-four years. This congregation demanded all of his time, for it had grown to three hundred members and was noted for its list of famous preachers, including Elders Anthony Williams, Charles T. Walker, Charles H. Brightharp, and Collins H. Lyons. Mr. Fisher had won the hearts of the people of La Grange by his consistent Christian bearing; his integrity had never been questioned.

His five children were taught a strict obedience to parents. At church, they took an accustomed seat on the second row, and when they were restless or discontented a glance from the rostrum was enough to straighten out the most troubled countenance, for all knew that at home he did not spare the rod.

A look into the parsonage will show how his wife made his starvation hire meet all needs quite well. It is no wonder that in patchwork she was most adept and with dexterity could "make ald clathes look almost as weel's the new."

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

III

SAILING DUE NORTH

1889-1901

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

SAILING DUE NORTH

1889-1901

Larger opportunities for service and the chance to go to school were offered in Atlanta, Georgia. At first he hesitated, with his limited preparation, to undertake the work of a city pastorate. His only impetus for such an undertaking, however, was the legacy that had come to him from his father, a copy of the Scriptures, a Baptist Hymnal, and pictures of Andrew Bryan and Andrew Marshall, the first two pastors of the First African Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia, conceded by some to be the first Negro Baptist church in America. To this he had added a "blue-back speller" and arithmetic, Rollin's Histories, James R. Boyd's "Eclectic Moral Philosophy," the Works of Josephus, Clarke's Commentaries, and Dr. G. S. Weaver's "Heart of the World."

He preached his "acceptance sermon" from Acts 10 : 29, "Therefore came I unto you without gainsaying, as soon as I was sent for; I ask therefore for what intent ye have sent for me?"

One of his first moves after entering upon the work at Mount Olive Baptist Church, October 1, 1889, was to matriculate in the divinity department of the Atlanta Baptist Seminary (now Morehouse College). Mr.

Digitized by Google

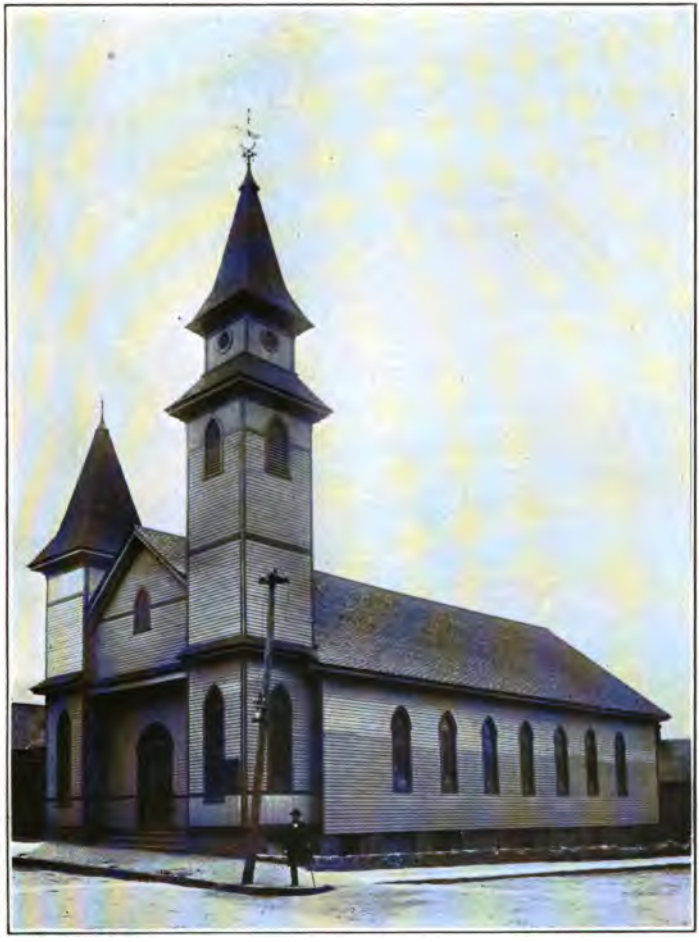
Fisher desired to enter the senior class; President Graves was willing if Mr. Fisher could make the grade.

"Give me three days," Pastor Fisher said, and at the end of that time he entered the Greek class, took Doctor Graves' "Outline Studies in Theology" and other courses, and graduated from the Theological Department with the class of 1890.

In three years' time by his labors and financial management, Pastor Fisher liquidated the heavy debt, added a belfry and vestibule to the church, installed the first pipe-organ, and bought and paid for new pews and the parsonage. He completely reorganized the church, organizing the first Baptist Young People's Union it ever had. He baptized one hundred and nineteen the first year, one hundred and fifty-five the second year, and closed a protracted meeting in 1893 in which there were ninety-eight additions, making the membership over six hundred. In this number of converts there was Henry Lincoln Johnson, now the only Negro Republican National Committeeman. This is a remarkable record when you consider the problems facing the church.

Mount Olive Baptist Church was in the most immoral and unhealthy part of the city, "Dark Town." The name suited it, for this section of the city was dark both physically and spiritually. Men were literally in caves, possessed with demons, tearing themselves with the chains of ignorance and sin, but when

Digitized by Google



MT. OLIVE BAPTIST CHURCH
Atlanta, Georgia

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

this messenger of the Cross came, the demons came out of the men, and there in their right minds they fell at his feet, willing to tell the story of Jesus to others. Even the many policemen stationed in this section of the city in the day, left it at night to the wiles of evil machinations.

It was not long, though, before the city paved this section and put in electric lights. The policemen were withdrawn in the day. The pastor of Mount Olive Church was such a moral force in this district that the most disturbing elements would subside and sneak away if only he was seen to pass. He was a living testimony of the transforming power of the gospel.

In 1893, Mr. Fisher was again elected Moderator of the Western Union Association, serving three years. The Association was connected with the State Convention, and much mission work was done. The Association was particularly strong in its maintenance of Baptist doctrines. Its programs were never complete unless some one delivered a sermon or paper touching New Testament fundamentals. The moderator was responsible for much of this.

Churches knew that in all Scriptural teachings the Moderator of the Western Union Association was firm. On one occasion he publicly debated with a Methodist brother on the doctrine of baptism and demonstrated his superior position and ability. The Cotton States had their International Exposition at Atlanta in November of 1895. The committee set

Digitized by Google

aside the fourteenth day as Baptist Day, and chose Pastor Fisher as master of ceremonies.

In this same year, all Negro Baptist churches and Associations were looking forward to the many religious gatherings in the City of Atlanta. Indeed, this was an unforgetable year for Mr. Fisher, Mount Olive Baptist Church, and the entire Baptist family.

The Negro Baptists of the nation met in their fifteenth annual session, September 28. Heretofore, the Baptist forces were divided between the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention of the United States of America, which turned its attention primarily to missions on the West Coast of Africa; the National Baptist Convention, which took care of home missions; and the National Baptist Educational Convention, which gave its attention to an educational program. At this session, a Foreign Mission Board, a Home Mission Board, and an Educational Board supplanted each of these conventions and became offspring of a united body thereafter known as the National Baptist Convention of the United States of America.

It was at this meeting that Pastor Fisher began to attract nation-wide notice. This meeting of the convention marked his seventh consecutive attendance, but only at this last session did he attain to an abiding recognition. He humorously related in after life how he with many others went to the meetings of the National Convention and never got so much as the attention of the chair. Such a course was not strange, for

Digitized by Google

at best only a few men got on the program and shaped the policies of the body. Many thought that the convention as a whole was not representative of the denomination in general, for many reserved, cool, and scholarly ministers would not resort to the boisterous, political, and "leather-lunged" methods that some thought had to be employed to attract attention in this open forum.

Pastor Fisher was coming into the light in Georgia. Doctors E. R. Carter, Charles T. Walker, Collins H. Lyons, and Emanuel K. Love were some of the older men leading the ranks. Doctor Love was the gigantic, leading, reactionary figure—pastor of the First African Baptist Church at Savannah, President of the Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia, and four times the President of the National Baptist Convention. Pastor Fisher represented the progressive element. Naturally, it would be to the interest of the reactionary forces to oppose the efforts of the progressives. Hence it was not strange for Doctor Love to make this utterance when he met Pastor Fisher at the State Convention in November:

"Fisher, when I leave this town your church won't have you as its pastor."

But Mr. Fisher was just as positive. "When you leave this town you won't be our president," he retorted.

Certain enough, the decree was fixed. The Rev. Collins H. Lyons, Secretary of the Missionary Bap-

Digitized by Google

tist Convention, attacked the president of that body. Sentiment was entirely in favor of Secretary Lyon's assertions since he was a first cousin of the president and was in a position to know the facts in the case. Thereupon Rev. Mr. Fisher led most of the delegates to his church and formed the temporary organization of the General Missionary Baptist and Educational Convention of Georgia with Dr. George W. Dwelle as first president.

Both of these factions lived for two years, neither doing the service for which they were started. Dr. T. J. Morgan of The American Baptist Home Mission Society wanted to harness this latent energy for service along the lines of education.

At his suggestion both conventions met in Macon. His plan was to enlist the cooperation of the Negro Baptists in support of the Home Mission schools, Spelman Seminary and Atlanta Baptist College (whose charter granted full college privileges in 1897). The Society felt that some support of the schools ought to be forthcoming since it had befriended the Negro in early times. The appeal was made to representatives of the churches because more was expected of this Christian leadership than of any other group, since for them so much more had been sacrificed.

Less contention centered around Spelman Seminary than around Atlanta Baptist College. President George Sale of the College might have averted some inimical developments if he had had a better knowl-

Digitized by Google

edge of the Negro. He was a Canadian and had brought to his well-filled office neither the prejudices of some Northerners for the Negro nor the prejudices of most Southerners against the Negro. He treated all parties concerned as men.

On the one hand, the reactionary element representing the Missionary Baptist Convention felt that it was time that Negroes were putting their money in some institution that they could own and control. This attitude grew out of a dilemna which white powers that rule over undeveloped peoples cannot escape; either people so ruled flourish under outside influence or they do not. If they do not flourish, there is no reason to continue there. If they do flourish, there is no power on earth that can eternally subdue the passion for self-government.

As it was, Doctor Morgan made clear the fact that all money thus far contributed had been donated.

On the other hand, the progressive element representing the General Missionary Baptist and Educational Convention held that all any one could ever hope to gain from an institution would be an education, and since the Atlanta Baptist College would always give that to Negro Baptists, they believed that it should be supported.

A logomachy followed, in which Doctor Morgan explained that those who failed to support the Society which had made an unparalleled contribution to Negro advancement were not in the least grateful. The re-

Digitized by Google

ply of that giant of Georgia, Emanuel K. Love, rang true to the hearts even of those who did not agree with many of his views, but his bluntness remained a bitter memory.

"Whenever we assert our manhood," he began with deep sarcasm, "you always say, Ingratitude! ingratitude! ingratitude! When will we ever get through paying our debt of gratitude?" he queried.

It may be that he never realized the results of his speech. It is seen today, for the college at Atlanta has a Negro president and is manned almost entirely by Negro educators. Nevertheless, for that occasion, opinions were divided. Even members of the Missionary Baptist Convention favored cooperation with the white Baptists. Much time was taken in order to avoid voting upon the matter, but speeches by Rev. Mr. Walker and Pastor Fisher clinched the proposition eternally. The plea of Doctor Morgan was sustained.

It was at this meeting that Mr. Fisher made the decision that determined his destiny. In truth, all of his subsequent work was an outcome of his conclusions at this meeting and, by way of anticipation, it is worthy to add that if he had not been in Atlanta, Georgia, he might never have gotten to Chicago, Illinois.

The Missionary Baptist Convention established Central City College at Macon. The Reverends E. R. Carter, C. S. Wilkins, and W. G. Johnson organized an Educational Society which lasted two years;

Digitized by Google

finding that their views were in harmony with those of the General Missionary and Educational Convention, they united. Hence there remained the two factions for over twenty years; recently these conventions have united.

Mr. Fisher served the General Missionary and Educational Convention as President of the Executive Board and was the Managing Editor of their official organ, the "Rome Journal."

Such a stand in favor of The American Baptist Home Mission Society called for action as well as words. Pastor Fisher had no hesitancy in sending his daughters, Gertrude and Mattie, to Spelman Seminary, and his sons, Elijah and James, to Atlanta Baptist College. He even furnished the means for several poor students to get the advantages of these Christian schools. Through poverty, misery, and woe he had at least achieved the notice of the people, and he felt it a duty to encourage the young element. One of the last of his acts while in Atlanta was a pleasant evening tendered the graduating classes of his *alma mater*.

REV. AND MRS. E. J. FISHER:

The graduating classes of Atlanta Baptist College will be pleased to accept your kind invitation to a reception Wednesday evening from 6 to 9 o'clock.

B. G. BRAWLEY, *Sec. Coll. Class.*

Even while a resident of Chicago he continued to send many students to Atlanta at a time when North-

Digitized by Google

ern institutions were less expensive and more fittingly equipped. But he knew that no white school could give the Negro youth poise, confidence, and a knowledge of his race like the Negro school. Today, the going of Northern students to Atlanta has become a movement.

Pastor Fisher served as trustee of Spelman Seminary and is reported to have done the unusual thing: He secured for a colored physician the privilege of practising in the Negro hospital of the Seminary which to this day is open only to white physicians. Selah!

All of his subsequent pastorates were simply enlargements of this one. He laid here the foundation of his future work. He taught the people to buy homes and open businesses. He himself was a silent partner with Doctor McDougal in a drug-store opposite the church.

At the commencement in 1896 of one of the Negro colleges, Mr. Fisher was honored with the degree of Doctor of Divinity and at the commencement of the same college the following year, he was again given the same distinction. It could not have been that Mr. Fisher was to give one of the degrees to another minister, for Negro preachers, from the youngest to the oldest, are traditionally doctors of divinity.

Mr. Fisher demonstrated at Atlanta that he was a race man, supporting each issue for the betterment of his people. A Negro restaurant was needed in the city, and he was one of the promoters, lending his

Digitized by Google

moral and financial support. With many of the leading Negroes of the State, a weekly religious newspaper, the "Atlanta Tribune," was launched and he assumed the editorship.

That form of newspaper was fairly typical of Negro religious periodicals with local circulations, and has become more successful than a national issue, probably because each individual church, constituting a whole, is interested first in itself. The busy Negro pastor being not only the spiritual adviser of the church, but also the business genius, philosopher, and guide, after making contributions to these journals and caring for his congregation, has little time for other literary work.

However, there have been valiant attempts at writing. Many of these have remained unpublished because the generous public has been less interested in the religious life of the Negro; because many of them have not been up to the standard, and because the whole matter has often been referred to the Negro Baptist press.

Still noble works, prominent treatises on religion, education, and history, and in fiction and poetry have been given the world by the Negro Baptist clergy. Pastor Fisher added two works to the number: "The Influence of Baptist Principles on Other Denominations" and "A Regenerated Church-membership and Why."

In the issue of the "Atlanta Tribune" for July 15, 1899, mention is made of an address of Editor Fisher,

Digitized by Google

July 8, to the white and colored citizens of Grantville and Coweta Counties on the relation of the races:

As no book of art, science, or philosophy can be so safely relied upon as the book of Holy Writ because of its author (he says) we shall call your attention to it in order that our relationship may be rightly set forth. In Genesis 1 : 26, God said, "Let us make man in our image; after our own likeness," and to this time no other creation has taken place which caused all the human family to begin with Adam. Then we are taught further that all were destroyed in the flood save Noah and the others of his family. . . Then one of the most scholarly and devout men, after leaving off his sins, tells us that "God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth . . ."

The Constitution of the United States recognizes these sayings and knows no racial lines or colors of skins, but regards all as citizens of this commonwealth. Hence all the rights and immunities that have been accorded any other citizen have been promised to the Negro, and it is the duty of those in authority to see to it that these rights be accorded the Negro as they are accorded other citizens.

We are here as American citizens and here to stay. Previous circumstances brought us here, and the right of choice which belongs to every citizen keeps us here. . . We are here to inform you and we raise our voices unreservedly with no uncertain sound to let you know that we are absolutely opposed to rape and crime in any form and in anybody, and we stand ready to join the white citizens of these counties in bringing to justice every rapist and every law violator. We cannot join any mob for the reason we propose to be law-abiding.

Probably Editor Fisher was not burned at the stake because he had only one leg. At any price, he de-

Digitized by Google

clared the whole truth and spared not. It was necessary to employ all of his rhetorical powers to hammer people to a sense of their possibilities. Time and time again he cried aloud from his rostrum that if people did not like his doctrines he would wend his way to the highways and by-ways, place his pulpit there, cry, "Holy, holy, holy," and some one would come out to hear him.

In "The City of Atlanta, a Descriptive, Historical and Industrial Review of the Gateway City of the South, Being the World's Fair Series on Great American Cities, 1892-1893," the editor, mentioning only three Negro churches, had this to say of Mount Olive and her pastor:

> Since his first attempt to educate himself ten years ago his success in public life has been marked. He was moderator of one of the colored Associations in the State. He is now and has been the Assistant Secretary of the Baptist Convention and President of the Executive Board of the State Convention. He is also a member of the National Baptist Convention of the United States of America and has not failed to attend a session for five years. He has baptized over twelve hundred people and has traveled and labored in evangelical work in this and other States.
>
> Reverend Fisher is a man of more than ordinary culture and the best elements of success.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

IV

AT THE COALING-STATION

1901-1903

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

AT THE COALING-STATION

1901-1903

It was not easy to resign a pastorate in which so many useful days had been spent. But Atlanta was no place for a man, who in frankness often became blunt, and who, declaring the whole truth, spared not the exploiters of the weak. Men with vision were needed farther on.

Mr. Fisher decided to go. He had no contempt for the South; for with a changed humanity, believing in law and righteousness, giving the opportunity to every man to win or lose the values of life, its days kissed by the crimson of the evening sun, its air sweet with the rose and magnolia, its fields rich with the snowy bolls of cotton, and its cattle fat on fertile slopes, the South would be the treasure land of the States. In the transition period he must do good elsewhere; there were seas into which his ship had not sailed.

The first stop was Nashville in the State of Tennessee, where future Ethiopia gathered from every State, from Africa, and from the West Indies. He tarried there to recruit strength; Spruce Street Baptist Church had extended him a call.

The city itself was attractive. The lights of the boulevards, the sloping hills and cool valleys, the pa-

Digitized by Google

latial residences of landed gentry fat from the life-blood of unrequited toilers, and the massive capitol with its terraced lawn offset with memories of civil strife, made up Nashville. On yonder hill below "Rock Town" was the reservoir from which pipes conveyed water to the city. The physical principle underlying this water system was that the pressure on such a volume was able to force the water through pipes, thereby furnishing cleanliness and refreshing drafts to every inhabitant. This huge reservoir, although a place of interest to the traveler, was, nevertheless symbolic of the condition of the Negro who lived apart and moved in a sphere all his own. The pressure of "Jim-Crowism," segregation, disfranchisement, and poor housing conditions had forced thirty thousand Negroes into a restricted space. As a result, the Negro area was replete with little businesses, schoolhouses, the offices of professional men, four institutions of higher learning, including one medical school, and a score of Baptist churches. Nashville was the center of operation of the National Baptist Convention. Its publishing-house was there printing the literature for thousands of churches of the enfranchised race.

But the future of Spruce Street Church was not assured; 1900 had been the year of calamity. The fire insurance upon the building had been reduced one-half, and mysteriously, in less than a month after the reduction, the building burned to the ground. The

Digitized by Google

insurance was not sufficient to erect a new building, and even if it had been, the money was not so used for, in the meantime, a division had taken place and the money was divided between the two factions. About three hundred members purchased property three lots from the church and there built a small edifice which they called the First Baptist Church. The remaining number under the Rev. J. E. Purdy had just sufficient funds to rebuild the basement of the large Spruce Street Church. They were worshiping there in 1901 when Rev. Mr. Fisher was called, after the death of their previous pastor.

Truly, there was nothing encouraging about the Spruce Street Church but the field. Much work needed to be done and done immediately. Mr. Fisher served the Spruce Street Church day and night, and in less than a year the graduating exercises of Roger Williams University were held in its new, commodious, and well-furnished auditorium. This gigantic accomplishment was characteristic of Negro pastoral methods. White congregations have the necessary funds subscribed and every detail planned before they lift a spade of dirt, while Negroes with practically no accumulated wealth and with less businesslike methods get the same, or even better results by relying on divine aid to supply all deficiencies. Many persons remarked that they had never seen building material go so fast to a place.

If reputation or honor was the aspiration of Pastor

Digitized by Google

Fisher he had indeed achieved that. However, the Spruce Street Church was not a monument to himself but a dedication to Jehovah. This last thought had been the inspiration that was peculiar to the members who had worked so earnestly and so well. God had been magnified at all times and in every meeting. Spruce Street Church was in the midst of evangelistic services continuously; the pastor was his own evangelist.

Almost before the church was under roof, the pastor was in demand for evangelistic services in and out of the city. Probably this was true for two reasons: First, he was an all-round evangelist, giving his message both in song and in sermon; and secondly, he was one of the outstanding men of the denomination. During the few days of his presence in any one of the principal cities of the country, the place was deeply stirred. Crowds thronged out of curiosity to hear this one-legged preacher, and his plain, outspoken, burning messages led impenitent men and women from all classes of society to leave their sins and turn to God. The first of his engagements was spent in the adjoining States of Kentucky, Carolina, and Virginia.

The winter of 1902 was not unlike many previously experienced by Mr. Fisher, but was very severe upon his family who were accustomed only to the warm sunshine and chilling rains of Georgia. Blinding snowstorms, hail, and sleet were the rule. It was hard traveling for pedestrians over the unpaved streets of

Digitized by Google

THE SPRUCE STREET BAPTIST CHURCH
Nashville, Tennessee

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

"Rock Town." Pastor Fisher walked from his home all the winter to attend revival services in his church, but his family attended very little. One evening in February, just about dusk, his mother, Charlotte, then past eighty-two years of age, set out for Spruce Street Church, a few squares distant. The snow was falling fast and a wintry blast was sweeping from the North. Without the knowledge of any one, Charlotte had emerged from the bungalow out upon the porch and thence down a short board walk covered with ice to the beaten pathways of the street toward the church. On and on she walked, but had not reached the church when her son returned that evening. Meanwhile, Mrs. Fisher, anxious over the mysterious disappearance of Charlotte, sent the two older boys in quest of her mother-in-law. The pastor called members of his flock, but they too had seen no trace of her. The police were notified. For days they hunted. The suspense was almost unendurable, but alas! about two weeks later they came upon her form about three miles from home with bonnet and shawl tied over her ears, frozen in the drifting snow.

The tragic death of his mother was a great shock to the minister already burdened with cares. He had striven hard to remember "the only commandment with promise," and had honored with loving and constant solicitude his dear mother. There remained of his immediate family only a sister, Mrs. Sarah Brown, and three brothers, Miles, Henry, and Abraham.

Digitized by Google

Solicitous as he was of the welfare of his mother, he was none the less zealous to remember his wife's mother and her family. He visited them frequently and never left them without providing a store of provisions and clothes. Naturally, they thought of him as their rich relative in Nashville, but Mr. Fisher was only demonstrating that charity did not begin at home but went skipping over hill and dale to minister to those in need.

With barely a living wage he sustained all of his children in institutions of higher learning as far as they would go. His three daughters, Gertrude Lillian, Shepherd Mattie, and Charlotte Emily, finished courses at Spelman Seminary. Gertrude also finished pharmacy in the Meharry Medical College; Mattie was a student in the college department of Roger Williams University until her health failed, and Charlotte graduated from the Teachers' Professional Course at Spelman. His sons, Elijah John, Jr., and James Edward, graduated from State University, Louisville, Kentucky, and Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia, respectively.

Mr. Fisher also saw the need of more training for himself. In leisure hours you could find him among the hundreds of volumes in his library in earnest preparation for each occasion. In a city with four institutions of higher learning, the pulpit needed to be no less qualified than the pew. A church governed by the people, to attain the highest development, must be

Digitized by Google

directed by a cultured and progressive ministry. In the summer of 1902, Mr. Fisher spent his vacation at the University of Chicago, in order to attain his cherished ambition of studying Greek and Hebrew. For the first time, too, he had an extended opportunity of surveying the great progressive center of the Northwest, Chicago.

These were preeminently the days of busy, bustling, history-making Chicago. He saw the Negro workers busy in their toil, side by side with the Caucasian, but he saw industries that Negroes could not enter. He saw Negroes voluntarily confined within an area called the " Black Belt," and serious dangers avoided only because of the relative scarcity of the colored people. He saw commercialized vice and the licensed saloon cursing the weaker element of his race and marring the splendid record of Negro achievement. He missed the number of businesses, institutions of learning, and well-to-do Negroes of Nashville, but found comfort in a few prominent physicians, lawyers, and institutions such as Provident Hospital and Amanda Smith's Home. He knew that he was a Negro by law in Nashville and felt that he was one by custom in Chicago. Chicago! Yes, Chicago smacked of freedom.

Denominationally, Nashville was better organized, being the center of many strong churches with outstanding men as pastors, while Chicago, having about the same Negro population, had only a few " storefront " churches, Berean and Bethesda being the most

Digitized by Google

prominent, and three congregations, Olivet, Shiloh, and Hermon, which would correspond with any of the thriving ones in Nashville.

Dr. S. J. Williams, an ex-president of the General Baptist State Convention of Illinois, said, "Before Rev. Mr. Fisher came to the State, we never knew officially that there was a National Baptist Convention."

This lack of acquaintance with national affairs and of cooperation in the Baptist ranks showed itself in the ineffectiveness of the churches which were to minister to the more than sixty thousand Negroes throughout the State. In settlements near Chicago, such as Glencoe, Lake Forest, Waukegan, Morgan Park, Evanston, and Joliet, there were in many cases either no churches or poorly organized and struggling beginnings.

Mr. Fisher was invited to preach in a goodly number of churches, including Olivet, the mother of Negro Baptist congregations in the city. He accepted the invitations, but returned to Nashville after the session of the University closed, to complete the work of the historic Spruce Street Church which had been firmly reestablished.

Shortly after his departure, trouble arose in the Olivet Church. Thirty-five thousand dollars from the sale of the church property on Harmon Court had been lost, and the church house at Twenty-seventh and Dearborn Streets was sold on account of a debt of

Digitized by Google

twenty-eight thousand five hundred dollars, which the church had not a penny to pay. The congregation was out of doors worshiping in Arlington Hall at Thirty-first Street and Indiana Avenue, and the pastor's relation was terminated.

Mr. Fisher became aware that the Olivet Church was without an undershepherd through several telegrams that passed between the official board and himself, as is shown by the following statement printed in the " Conservator ":

> After several telegrams passed between the official board and Doctor Fisher, he consented to pay us a visit which he did. The church was so well pleased with him that they extended to him a call October 20, 1902.

Nevertheless, the condition of the church was such that many of his acquaintances wrote, " Don't come, you can't make it here." He was confronted by the thought that, on the one hand, it would seem the part of human wisdom to stay at the helm of the church which was now prepared to do large service, and, on the other hand, that it would be unbaptistic and unmanly to refuse a task involving difficulty. His commission read, " Go . . . preach," and was so simple in its interpretation that no difficulty could hinder him nor hierarchy determine for him when or where to go.

After due consideration the following message was placed in the hands of the Spruce Street Baptist Church, December 7, 1902, for a hearing:

Digitized by Google

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE.

To the Officers and Members of the Spruce Street Baptist Church.

My very dear Sisters and Brethren:

Two years ago you called me as your pastor to take charge of your church as its spiritual leader under God; therefore I came, without gainsaying, determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I thank God through Jesus Christ for you all, and thank you for the confidence which you have had in me and for the assistance you have rendered during my stay with you.

Many have been the pleasant moments which we have spent together doing the work of the Lord, and much has been accomplished. Although we have not done what we desired to do, under the circumstances we have done what we could.

We have about completed your house of worship valued at over thirty thousand dollars, all of which has been paid except a few hundred dollars. Unlike the people in the days of Nehemiah, you did not all have a mind to work, but let us thank God for what has been accomplished. We have had more than two hundred accessions to the church during our pastorate, many of whom are upright, faithful, Christian men and women.

I have taken great delight in the work of the Lord here among you, and have done my best since the first day I reached your city to advance the cause of our Redeemer both by precept and example.

I have learned to love many of you for your nobility of faith and Christian character. I feel at a loss to know of the day of our separation, but I find that there is another field which does not perhaps need me worse than you as for the preaching of the gospel, but because of the condition of the house of worship, of the scattered condition of the members

Digitized by Google

of that church, and of the condition of the Baptist denomination in general which lies nearest and dearest my heart. Therefore, having been unanimously called by the members of the Olivet Baptist Church of Chicago, Illinois, and assured by many citizens both white and colored of their unanimity to have me come to that field, and it does seem in this case that the " voice of the people is the voice of God," believing that I can do more there under the existing circumstances to advance the cause of my Redeemer, I do most respectfully, and yet lovingly—because I want always to be remembered and loved by you, as you are and will be by me, because you are deserving—tender you my resignation as Pastor of the Spruce Street Baptist Church to go into effect January 25, 1903.

Praying the blessings of Almighty God upon you and the church, that he will keep you in perfect peace and love, and that he may give you another shepherd who will be more influential in bringing your husbands, your wives, your children, and your neighbors to Jesus Christ than I have been, and asking an interest in your prayers ever in my behalf, I remain

Your brother in Jesus Christ,

ELIJAH J. FISHER.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

V

THE STORM

1903-1904

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

THE STORM

1903-1904

The Olivet Baptist Church logically carried with it the leadership of the Negro Baptist family in Chicago and in Illinois. The former pastor on account of past connections desired with other ministers to hold that leadership, although the right to it was not his. Whereupon, opposition was manifested. With some of this opposition Mr. Fisher was acquainted, but with other phases of it he was not. A letter from the official board speaks for itself the sentiment of the church regarding the former pastor and the property, also giving light on the case of two hundred members who had been enjoined from coming back to Olivet:

CHICAGO, January 20, 1903.

Mr. Chauncey M. Miller:

You are hereby authorized to take charge of the interests of the Olivet Baptist Church in the matter now and heretofore pending between the church and its creditors represented by Israel Cowen, Mr. Dunne, and J. H. Hooper, and also the claim of Jasper Higginbotham; and obtain the best possible terms for settlement of the church debts and repurchase of the church property; and for your services in endeavoring to effect such settlements and repurchase, we agree to pay you the sum

Digitized by Google

of three hundred dollars, in addition to your services in the injunction suit.

The first expression of this growing antagonism toward Rev. Mr. Fisher was mild, but upon his installation Beelzebub and his demons seemed let loose. The services were held Monday evening, January 26, 1903. The program was made up of city celebrities, including Dr. George C. Hall, the Rev. A. J. Carey, Hon. B. F. Moseley, Mr. Monroe N. Work, Dr. Johnston Myers, pastor the Immanuel Baptist Church (white), Mrs. G. M. DeBaptiste Faulkner, Mrs. I. A. Davis, National Organizer Colored Women's Clubs, and Messrs. O. L. Ballinger, Henry T. Elby, Stephen A. Griffin, and William Jefferson representing the church proper. In addition, the colored Baptist ministers were invited and were expected to take an active part, but none of them appeared. Pastor Fisher anticipated this occurrence and asked his schoolmate, a man of national repute, the Rev. P. James Bryant, of Atlanta, Georgia, to officiate. Dr. Johnston Myers and Rev. Mr. Bryant made the principal addresses on this occasion, whose import has not been forgotten by those in sympathy with the aspirations of the Olivet people.

A spirit prevailed in Mr. Fisher not ordinarily seen. He said:

Under my pastorate I have succeeded in leading the members of Olivet to the belief that it was right to have the injunc-

Digitized by Google

tion dissolved and to declare ourselves at peace with the world in general and Ebenezer (the church formed by the former pastor) in particular, without discussing the whys and wherefores of the matter.

To confirm this report the Olivet Church, through its clerk, Brother Richard Williams, in reply to an "Unknown Baptist Preacher on the History of the Ebenezer Baptist Church," whose words appeared in the "Conservator," March 7, 1903, said that, in addition to the fact that Mr. Fisher was not a party to the fight in the church last year, "our pastor has advised us to let Ebenezer and Rev. Thomas alone."

The reason for this is clear. Mr. Fisher did not have the time nor the energy to waste in fighting. All of his powers at this critical time were required for the constructive work which was so needful. There was not a song-book, Bible, chair, or anything in the church. The congregation was out-of-doors with no visible way to enter the building. However, the pastor-elect loaned his last dollar to the church, and they were able to rent the partially completed edifice for sixty-five dollars a month. A registration of all the members was taken, and an enrolment of nearly six hundred was the result. Here was a nucleus large enough around which to build a temple of untold possibilities. The work was going on but not without a contest of words.

Glaring headlines characterized the issue of the "Broadax" for May 30, 1903, reading, "THEO-

Digitized by Google

DORE W. JONES SAYS THAT REV. E. J. FISHER MISMANAGES THE AFFAIRS OF OLIVET":

Perhaps no other community and not another church large or small would copy the generous method of the Olivet Church of this city in dealing with a jack-leg preacher. In many other places he would be made to pay the penalty for ignorance, error, and wrong-doing by being driven out of town. But in Chicago, and at Olivet, he may go practically unwhipped of justice. . .

The Rev. E. J. Fisher, through whose gross mismanagement the Olivet Church has just lost $21,000, and who conscious of having such a bad case on his hands has actually opened a revival meeting, not out of love for the Master, not for the salvation of a single soul, but merely to detract attention from himself. If this show with all its acts is not sacrilegious, I do not know what it can be. But it signally illustrates a jack-legged preacher's alertness and resourcefulness in a case of emergency.

To call a man like Fisher honest is like calling black white or eulogizing the devil as a noble character. By honesty, I do not mean simply scrupulous exactness in accounting for moneys collected. In this article I wish, especially, to apply the word to Fisher's attitude in opening a revival at this time.

The whole article from beginning to end shows an unfamiliarity with the facts in the case. That the church was to receive fifteen thousand dollars as a gift from an unknown donor if they could raise six thousand dollars was known to the treasurer, Deacon Henry Elby, long before Rev. Mr. Fisher came to Chicago.

Digitized by Google

CHICAGO, ILL., June 21, 1901.

Mr. H. T. Elby,
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Sir:

Had an interview with the party we were speaking of, and he said that he had heard of that congregation before, and that they were not deserving but that he felt kindly toward them.

We will wait for him, Henry, to consider the matter, and I will make this proposition to you, but my name must not be mentioned to any one for reasons that I have stated to you before.

If the congregation, Henry, that you are with will commence and raise from the first of July, 1901, to January 1, 1902, the sum of six thousand dollars ($6,000) *honestly* I will donate to you for the Olivet congregation, the sum of fifteen thousand dollars ($15,000), to be used in finishing their edifice or canceling their indebtedness.

If this proposition is agreeable to your Pastor, executive officers, and congregation, notify me at once so that I can then place the amount above mentioned at the disposal of the executive officer of Olivet Baptist Church, if they can meet the requirement as to the raising of the amount above mentioned.

Yours very truly,

Ø. Ø.
C. L. XXXX.

There is something mysterious about the signature, familiarity, and contents in this letter. Only Mr. Elby could decipher it. The donor had not been known prior to the installation services of Rev. Mr. Fisher. On that night he arose and said: "Out of

Digitized by Google

regard to Mr. Elby and my respect to this present pastor, I come. I believe your pastor is a worthy gentleman, and we are going to do everything to help the church under him to prosper."

For three months Mr. Elby negotiated with this party so that the six thousand dollars raised was gone and Elby himself arrested. The "Chicago Daily News" reported a half-column item under the heading "ELBY, CONVICTED TREASURER OF OLIVET (COLORED) BAPTIST CHURCH, CONFESSES":

Henry T. Elby [it said], convicted of embezzling $6,000 of the funds of Olivet Baptist Church, colored, told today how he had been duped by two white men who worked on his credulity and made his eyes glisten by the use of the name of John D. Rockefeller. They persuaded him, he said, to tell the church Mr. Rockefeller would give the congregation $15,000 toward a debt of $28,000 if the members would raise $6,000. They called the Standard Oil Magnate "John." They shone at church "sociables" and posed as capitalists. One of them, said Elby, got him to pay an instalment on a suit of clothes so as to impress the colored church folk.

Now Elby faces the penitentiary. He says he does not want a new trial. But Judge Chytraus has ordered Assistant State's Attorney John R. Newcomer to lay before the present grand jury the names of the two white men. The judge said the men should be indicted.

Elby made a complete confession today to a reporter for the "Daily News," in the presence of Deputy Sheriff Wesley Blummer, and laid bare the story of intrigue and manipulations

Digitized by Google

of the funds the church raised. One of the white men involved is said by Elby to be an oil-stock promoter named Kinney. Elby introduced Kinney to the congregation and trustees as "Mr. Belcalf, a friend of John D. Rockefeller." The other man is known to Elby and the church-members as "J. Derriger."

"I first met this man, Derriger, in a lawyer's office," said Elby. "I was trying then to stave off a lawsuit against the church of which I was treasurer. Derriger was there and learned from me our trouble with the church debt. He said he was in sympathy with the colored people, informed me he was a wealthy man and would help us by donating a large amount to the church. Derriger put up the scheme of writing the letter which purported to come from Rockefeller. Then we went to fix up a certified check to show that Rockefeller was in earnest about the donation and that it was ours if the church raised the required $6,000. I went to Kinney and he made out the check at my request, and right here is where I got into trouble."

From this testimony it is easy to understand the contents of the following letter:

CHICAGO, ILL., April 18, 1903.

Mr. Henry T. Elby,
66 State Street, Chicago.

Dear Sir:

After having a pleasant interview with the Doctor (Fisher) and yourself, I suggested what was said to Father (Mr. Rockefeller). Knowing that he (Rev. Fisher) is firm in all matters of that kind, and would act just as I did. Finally he consented to have our attorney to meet the attorney for the church, if so desired, and have him to explain his plans so that the

Digitized by Google

same could be handed to Father. This will be attended to in a few days. We wish earnestly to impress that we have no desire to keep what is coming to the congregation in trust, if you wish the same, but we would like for you people to take good business advice. Please wait patiently for a reply from Father and myself.

Sincerely yours,

O. W. BELCALF.

It is hardly possible to imagine the amount of good that this controversy did in cementing the people to Rev. Mr. Fisher. Still, there is exemplified here a tendency which is all too common among a people embarrassed by foes within and without. Somewhere, some time, and somehow, the Negro press should, unrequited, take up the burdens heaped upon leaders unnecessarily by persons who are beside themselves. A better place has not been named than Chicago, " no time is like the present," and no method is more fitting than that which could be employed by the " race's greatest weekly."

Abuse did not intimidate Mr. Fisher, ingratitude did not embitter him, misrepresentation did not anger him, for he was able to say with Paul, " None of these things move me; neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus." Each Sunday as he graced his pulpit he showed tremendous power, not passing a single Sunday without some accession to the church. Time and again he

Digitized by Google

invited city pastors to preach for him, showing his unselfishness and brotherliness. Many times they responded, and God would manifest himself in the midst always by several accessions. Through the "Banner," a paper founded and edited by Pastor Fisher, "to diffuse religious truth in love through the flock and whoever else should desire it," we note that on the third Sunday in May, 1903, when the Rev. W. S. Bradden, of Berean, and the Rev. B. P. E. Gayles, of Evanston, filled the pulpit of Olivet, twelve souls were added to the church.

In spite of, and probably because of, the splendid success coming to the church, frequent disturbances and outside influences were trying to counteract the works of God. Again an open letter to the "Broadax," June 27, 1903, furnished the news-stands with this headline: "WILLIAM JEFFERSON TRIUMPHS OVER REV. E. J. FISHER OF OLIVET BAPTIST CHURCH." Recalling that Mr. Jefferson delivered the welcome greetings at the installation of Mr. Fisher, you can appreciate his change of view in respect to the pastor of the Olivet Church:

> Rev. Fisher, Brothers Wimby, Edwards, Elby, Williams, and Griffin were in the pastor's study about 11 o'clock at night, when they heard a loud and "improper noise tending to the breach of the peace." Upon investigation it was learned that this loud and improper noise was headed for the church . . . in the person of Brother Jefferson.

Digitized by Google

Doctor Fisher was so frightened that he was not in a fit condition to make an accurate description as he surveyed the enemy, yet he probably drew a mental picture of a monster, half dragon, with " feet like a bear, and a mouth as the mouth of a lion." Fortunately, instead of making an unlawful and wilful attack on the door of the church, the beast merely opened his mouth, not in blasphemy against God, as did the Revelator's beast, but in a threat to make Doctor Fisher jump in Lake Michigan. After this tendency to a " breach of peace " that loud and improper noise moved slowly down Twenty-seventh Street, much to the satisfaction and evident relief of Doctor Fisher and his panic-stricken officers. About an hour later these " tin soldiers " formed themselves into a hollow square and escorted the Rev. Doctor Fisher to Mrs. Knuckles' home, two of the brethren remaining the rest of the night as a body-guard.

This description is interesting in detail, and surely the writer had a vivid imagination, but he pictures only one of the many incidents of Rev. Mr. Fisher's antagonism. He forgot to mention the individual who not only shot words but bullets at the innocent preacher. To this day the bullet-hole in the study of the old church home is a memorial to the trials of Pastor Fisher. For many months he was heavily guarded on his way home. Added to this, the sheriff was at his door serving warrants almost as often as the weeks passed.

To the casual reader this statement might seem strange, but to those connected with a Negro Baptist church it is a common thing for civil authorities to manifest their power in ecclesiastical affairs. Proba-

Digitized by Google

bly a weakness of the democratic form of government with untrained people! But where democracy is perverted into mobocracy there follow warrants and imprisonment in religious as well as in civil life. A colored brother imprisoned by an impassioned faction in his church remarked that Paul and Silas were put in jail for preaching the gospel and that if ministers preached the right kind of gospel they too would be arrested. Undoubtedly, Mr. Fisher was a gospel messenger.

Like all pioneers in new thought and endeavor, martyrdom was his lot. Rev. Mr. Fisher realized this and saw the old prophet's " bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain." At the present day few know of the reproaches heaped upon the heads of Livingston, Howard, or Whitefield, but all men recognize them as leaders in the Zion of our God, whose services and names will be held in everlasting remembrance. Hardships the Reverend Fisher endured, but none of these things can be compared with the favor of posterity recognizing him as the foundation builder among Negro Baptists in the Northwest. Impressive is the superstructure even now, but far sweeter will be the plaudits of his Saviour, who at judgment-day will make up the crown of his everlasting rejoicing with the jeweled souls redeemed through his instrumentality. The sacrifice was worth while.

After months of misrepresentations, struggles, trials, and persecutions, the dawn of relief arose. Beelzebub

Digitized by Google

was chained for a season. For the first time the pastor had an opportunity to reflect that Illinois was a place where men had a constitutional chance to be free. The very atmosphere of the State where Lovejoy was murdered and Lincoln lay buried was scintillating with liberty. Pastor Fisher's interpretation of this was that it should not be confined to religion but extended to politics as well. Many men in his position would have thought that for the church to succeed religiously, it must not be a social or political factor, but this idea has been refuted largely by the number of institutional churches that have multiplied. He believed that with religion first, there was no form of activity in which the church should not indulge. This was a good Baptistic view for a pioneer, since the founder of the Baptist denomination in America, Roger Williams, was chosen President (Governor) of Rhode Island.

Rev. Mr. Fisher as a pioneer in the Northwest followed in his political wake. This provoked storms of opposition, but as long as the religious part of the church was first, and nothing was taken away from that, he continued to exercise his talents in the field of religion, sociology, and politics. From the time of his first arrival in Chicago, Pastor Fisher began to participate in the politics of the city.

Hon. Jesse A. Baldwin sent a due appreciation for efforts in his behalf for municipal office in a letter dated June 11, 1903:

Digitized by Google

Dear Dr. Fisher:

I beg you to accept my sincere thanks for the aid you rendered and the cordial support you gave me in my recent campaign. . . That I received so large a vote, under all the circumstances, is due to the very active efforts of my friends and, among the number, yourself who so generously and actively advocated my election. My campaign was conducted without dishonorable or disreputable methods. . . I shall ever remember with gratitude your cordial and generous support.

Mr. Fisher headed the list of Negro voters in the twenty-second precinct of the Second Ward and was sure to advise them along the right lines. He was interested solely in the good of the people and meant to advocate " every measure of right and denounce every measure of wrong." He was not office-seeking nor was he willing to run after candidates; he wished simply to find out the policy of the candidate, and if it was right to advise the people. A letter from the headquarters of Hon. Charles S. Deneen, a candidate for governor of the State of Illinois, follows:

CHICAGO, April 8, 1904.

My dear Sir:

If you could find it convenient to call at these headquarters and see Mr. Deneen, Mr. West, or myself, we would very much appreciate it.

Hoping that this will find you enjoying good health, I am

Very truly yours,

JAMES PEASE.

Digitized by Google

He answered on April 9, 1904:

Hon. James Pease,
Grand Pacific Hotel,
Chicago, Ill.

My dear Sir:

Yours of the eighth instant to hand and contents carefully noted. In reply I would say that I would gladly converse with either or all of you gentlemen. You did not state whether you have any particular hour, therefore, I am not in a position to say when I could call. I could spend thirty minutes with either of you Tuesday at 10.30 a. m., in getting certain information that I very much need for myself and my people.

I have heard much of the Hon. Mr. Deneen and I am pleased with his past record as a citizen and as a bold and fearless statesman. I admire these qualities in a leader of my country.

Now as the duties of my pastorate are so numerous I shall await your coming and gladly welcome you at the study of the Olivet Church, Twenty-seventh and Dearborn Streets, Tuesday at 10.30.

Respectfully,

E. J. FISHER.

The conference was held and Pastor Fisher was able with twenty-three other Negroes to sign "A Word to Colored Voters, Endorsing Charles S. Deneen for Governor of the State of Illinois, in the primaries of May 6, 1904."

Of course such a participation on the part of a Baptist minister called out severe disapproval from many of his brethren, but he exercised liberty of conscience,

Digitized by Google

believing that he must give an account to God for opportunities to help his race and country. His belief in righteousness was catholic. He believed in personal righteousness in individual conduct, domestic righteousness in business, and civic righteousness in the State. There was and is little use standing aloof from the reforms of the State and deploring the failure of right living in modern life when a man is needed to stand four-square on all matters of the gospel, even if his stand calls for active participation in political movements. However much antagonism was brought about, it is an evident fact that those churches which failed to carry out this policy of right living even by example failed to progress in so marked a degree as those which stood for the purification of life in every form.

Whether this progress was due to interest in political affairs or in spite of this participation, we note with a great deal of interest that the Rev. E. J. Fisher and the Rev. A. J. Carey, D. D., now a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, two active participants in Republican circles, were leaders in their denominations in hastening the kingdom of our Lord.

The reward of Pastor Fisher was not wholly in the future, for more and more were his Methodist brethren and white friends speaking kindly of his work for God. During the Lexington Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church he delivered an address in behalf of the Negro Baptists. The Annual Report

Digitized by Google

of the Baptist City Mission Society for the year ending 1903 speaks of the Olivet Church in these terms:

We are not rendering assistance on this field at the present time, except in the way of advice. As most of you know, after fifty years of existence as a church, and after purchasing a lot, and partially completing a beautiful and commodious building, the property has been sold under foreclosure of mortgage, and they are paying rent. Two persons are contending in the Supreme Court for possession. It is expected that the ownership will be settled next month. At that time the pastor, Doctor Fisher, hopes to be able to purchase the property, and thereby prevent it from being used as a storage warehouse. It will require $21,000 to do this. They do not ask for a gift, but for a time loan in order that they may be able to meet the demands made upon them next month. They are accumulating funds and placing the same in the care of our Superintendent. The lot cost $13,000, and the contract was let to erect the building at a cost of $43,000. It will cost at least $10,000 to complete it. A conservative estimate of the property is $28,000.

The task of Olivet was indeed gigantic. No opportunity could be spared in putting the facts in view of all sympathizers regardless of race.

ENGLEWOOD BAPTIST CHURCH OF CHICAGO,
513 West Sixty-second Street,

October 16, 1903.

Dr. E. J. Fisher.

My dear Brother:

Doctor Manning tells me that you have consented to speak at the Englewood Baptist Church in our City Mission Sym-

Digitized by Google

posium on Sunday a. m., October 25. My assistant, Rev. A. A. Hobson, who is a good speaker, will preach for the Olivet Baptist Church. Will you kindly drop me a line so I may know this plan is all right?

Sincerely,

H. FRANCIS PERRY, *Minister.*

This plan met the hearty approval of Pastor Fisher. Although the minister was held in high esteem, as can be gleaned from a letter from a representative of The American Baptist Home Mission Society, Olivet had to come into contact with those who could help.

CHICAGO, ILL., October 29, 1903.

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter certifies that I am personally acquainted with Dr. E. J. Fisher, the present pastor of the Olivet Baptist Church of this city. He is a graduate of our Home Mission School in Atlanta, Georgia, and for some years was one of our trustees of our Spelman Seminary in Atlanta. Doctor Morehouse, during his recent visit in this city, spoke in high terms of the business ability of Mr. Fisher and expressed himself as feeling confident that the Olivet Baptist Church here would clear its property of indebtedness and be established in the community should Doctor Fisher's life be spared for this work.

I have known the struggles of the Olivet Baptist Church here for the past eight years and feel, for the first time during these years, confident that it will become financially and permanently established if Doctor Fisher is spared and if his appeal to the brethren is responded to. I trust that all who can will help in this matter according to their ability.

JUDSON B. THOMAS, *Dist. Sec'y.*

Digitized by Google

Olivet Church had a facsimile of this letter printed and with a statement from the clerk, Brother Thomas W. Stevens, concerning the exact state of affairs, addressed these communications to the people. The statement read:

You have doubtless seen through the daily papers of the loss of six thousand dollars ($6,000) to the Olivet Baptist Church by embezzlement of our treasurer. The loss is very great. It caused the foreclosure of the mortgage and the sale of our beautiful house of worship on Twenty-seventh and Dearborn Streets. We are twenty-one thousand dollars ($21,000) in debt. We are struggling to the extent of our ability to raise the money to buy the church back.

The Supreme Court has confirmed the decision of the lower court in giving the property back to us for the sum of ten thousand eight hundred fifteen dollars ($10,815) provided we settle all of the outstanding claims first. This we are endeavoring to do and therefore ask that you donate some amount to help pay this debt, as we only have sixty days from date to meet the requirement.

The effect of this plea and the recommendations of the white brethren can be seen later in the marvelous way in which the occasion was met. All through this endeavor it is not hard to hear the workings of Rev. Mr. Fisher's brain. He had schooled his workers, laid his plans, and successfully executed them.

Marked attainment had been achieved for Christ in this year of kaleidoscopic turmoil. Of souls there had been won more than a hundred. The financial offerings of the church were triple that of any pre-

Digitized by Google

vious year. The people were well pleased with their minister, but Mr. Fisher had commenced to wonder if it was God's will that he should remain in Chicago. Churches in the Southland were asking for his guidance. Atlanta was financially outbidding Chicago. He might have played the role of a quitter, but he had an aversion to what Doctor Benedict, in his "Fifty Years Among the Baptists," calls "Mr. Stayshort" preacher. What would it take to be a success in this field? Success could not come because of his descent, for his race had been forced into slavery and cursed ever since for having been slaves. It could not come because of his surroundings, for there was not a more discussed public servant. Success must come of himself. A man thus situated needed to possess in an eminent degree the force of strong convictions, an unyielding purpose, clear perception, economical habits, imperturbable self-possession, a working knowledge of Negro-ology, a constitution of iron, a humble spirit, and a firm reliance on the sustaining grace of God.

There were encouraging moments even in the darkest hours of reflection. He was granted certain courtesies by railroads to any points he desired to go, and his endorsement was necessary in order that Negro Baptist preachers get clergy permits. This privilege and honor created dissension rather than unity among some older and more aspiring brethren, but he would not be discouraged. Testimonials of appreciation from the denomination were coming every day. In

Digitized by Google

the mail of January 31, 1904, came a letter from the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute dated the twenty-eighth instant:

My dear Mr. Fisher:

I have your kind letter of January 21 and thank you for it.

I have read of the commendable progress your church has made since your pastorate, and I congratulate you on the results.

Although I have already formally accepted an invitation to speak under certain auspices I shall keep in mind your suggestion, and shall hope to have a chance to go to your church. If I can do so I shall esteem it a privilege, I assure.

Thanking you very sincerely for the kindly courtesy evidenced in your letter, and for the expression of interest in our work, I am

Very truly yours,
BOOKER T. WASHINGTON.

Rev. Mr. Fisher resolved that it was his duty to remain where he was. How well it was for the church no one acquainted with its history need be informed.

John the Baptist, and his theme of repentance, were eminently adapted to herald the coming Messiah. Wesley could do a task different from John in awakening Christendom to the necessity of organized forms of religious endeavor. Luther was given strong sinews like bands of steel so that he might strike with his Thor's hammer of free speech on the anvil of the new order scintillating sparks of Protestantism that would kindle the heart of modern Europe. Providence

Digitized by Google

called Mr. Fisher to the Olivet Baptist Church, and a recognition of his characteristics proves his personal fitness to arch his sail to a stormy gale, so that like Coleridge's Mariner "he was the first that ever burst into that lonely sea."

He appreciated the sentiment in the letter from Dr. J. Milton Waldron: "I was delighted to hear from you and am very glad you are not to leave Chicago, for you are needed there."

Having decided to stay, he saw his bitter antagonists paid with a vengeance divine. The paper that had been so uncharitable had almost become extinct. He lived to see the editor assigned to the asylum for the insane. His arch-enemies failed in business and had to seek to work their chicanery in other cities. Elby was still imprisoned. Still, through it all, Mr. Fisher was not exultant; he sympathized. He immediately set to work to have Elby released. He introduced and signed the petition. In reference to this and other Christian acts a periodical quoted before says of him:

> His faults abound in his virtues; he is too charitable to his foes; he is too merciful to those who dislike him, and he is too broad to those who antagonize his efforts.

Undoubtedly, the writer overlooked the fact that Pastor Fisher was striving after that sweet charity which suffereth long and is kind, which thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but beareth all things, hopeth all things, and endureth all things.

Digitized by Google

At the commencement exercises of Guadalupe College, Sequin, Texas, in May of 1904, Mr. Fisher received the degree of Doctor of Laws. None but a very eminent divine could have well refused such a distinction, if he were so inclined, without seeming to encourage the notice which he desired humbly to avoid.

Tuesday, November 8, was election day, and arrangements were made with the Western Union Telegraph Company to connect wires and place an operator in the church in order that the congregation and friends might receive the returns. Handbills were distributed throughout the colored section of the city to this effect: "DON'T GO TO BARROOMS NOR TO PUBLIC HALLS, NEITHER STAND ON THE STREETS FOR THE RETURNS, BUT COME TO OLIVET WHERE YOU CAN BE SEATED."

Digitized by Google

VI

THE CALM

1904-1910

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

THE CALM

1904-1910

The church was moving along smoothly. Besides affording opportunity for the regular services, including preaching and prayer-meetings and Bible classes, the church was the social center of the community, the place of amusement and of gathering information. Even in early years, Mr. Fisher was in accord with the advancement of the times, encouraging athletic contests and a literary society where young and old could hear and discuss current events. On New Year's day the annual program under the auspices of the Standard Literary Society was rendered to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation.

Some of the most noted singers, musicians, and entertainers have appeared in concerts and recitals at the church. But the spiritual function of the church was always first. Before one of the auxiliaries enjoyed itself in celebrating the birthday of George Washington, in 1905, Rev. Mr. Fisher administered the ordinance of baptism to two young men and a lady.

Mr. Fisher could interpret well the characteristics of Negro religion. He knew that a large part of it was only emotional. This fact could easily be accounted for since the last vestiges of hysterical emo-

Digitized by Google

tionalism, characterized by a sing-song chant, plenty of "rousement" or "gravy" interrupted "continually by the heavy groans and occasionally by the weird cry of a happy 'mourner,'" had not had time to die away. He believed in enthusiastic religion but did not countenance a church in demoniac pandemonium because what he was saying would be lost. Many a time in his sermons he stopped until some sister finished "shouting," and then continued. If, however, he knew ill about the past life of the "shouter" he would ask her to sit down. She would immediately obey but would get very angry, thus proving that, at best, "shouting" was often very superficial, the "shouter" all a sham, an empty wagon making much noise.

Nevertheless, his theology, appealing not primarily to the blood that was in the veins but rather to the brains that were in the head, was not a cold intellectual fact. It was a potent, dynamic factor, ever fervent and spiritual, being enriched by a life of devotion and prayer. His preaching told the people how to live clean, honest, sober lives, and then they would have no trouble in getting ready to die. Too, he emphasized the great fundamentals upon which the New Testament church stands. The "Illinois Idea" for February 25, 1905, writes concerning these doctrinal discourses:

> Doctor Fisher is preaching a series of sermons that every one who wishes instruction concerning the Baptist doctrine would do well to go and hear. Each of his sermons on last

Digitized by Google

Sunday showed the deepest research and was delivered in the grandest style to the pleasure of every thoughtful person present. Next Sabbath morning he will give seven reasons for becoming a Baptist. Those wishing to know why they are Baptists would do well to hear him. The doctor is proving himself equal to the task undertaken. Many strong men are uniting with Olivet each week. . .

Speaking as he did upon such fundamentals, it would be clear where he would stand today on any movement having for its ultimate aim church unionism:

Why have our separate churches, ministers, colleges, etc.? Why not unite and lose our existence into one denomination? Truly, I wish there could be a loving, friendly, intelligent, and candid discussion of this subject by every Protestant denomination in Christendom. The generous public before giving support has a right and should demand to know a Scriptural reason for denominational separate existence. We hold that to separate Christians, except on the ground of pure Scriptural differences, is no just cause for the existence of a church and, as Baptists, we recognize the right of the public to know why we exist as a separate and distinct denomination.

We are willing gladly to answer for ourselves. Some would answer by saying that this is a land of religious liberty, and if the Baptists wish to maintain a separate existence no one has a right to object. Did we as Baptists exist only upon that, our existence would only be based on a volition. As a Baptist, I deny such a right and the assumption upon which it rests. Religious liberty does not consist in the right of one to do as he pleases in religious matters. Two things must be noted here: First, our religious liberty must not run counter to the will of God . . . and, secondly, our religious liberty must not interfere with our duty to our fellow men. . .

Digitized by Google

There are characteristics supposed by others to mark the people that are called Baptist. . . Scores of Baptists have been asked what is the difference between your and other denominations. Their answer has simply been that Baptists believe in immersion. The answer, as far as it goes, is correct, but it does not go far enough and is therefore shallow and imperfect. Others have answered the question by saying that Baptists practise close communion. This statement is misleading and superficial. . . Such an intelligent man as Doctor Gotch carelessly states the fundamentals as he has done in the Encyclopedia Britannica by saying, "The Baptists as a denomination are distinguished by the views they hold respecting the ordinance of Baptism." I declare unto you that there is a far greater difference than this and I shall endeavor to show it. . .

The fundamental principle is our belief in the supreme authority and absolute sufficiency of the Word of God. Our separate existence is a practical and logical fulfilment of the commission from headquarters recorded by Matthew 28 : 19 reading, "Go ye, therefore, and disciple all nations, immersing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." The whole Bible is the foundation upon which the Baptist church is based and not the decrees of popes, councils, assemblies, conferences, synods, presbyteries, or conventions. We must have for our action a "Thus saith the Lord," or we are not at all bound to act regardless of who gives the orders. . .

Relying on God's Word we believe in a Scriptural church, hence a regenerated membership; a divinely called ministry, therefore the equality of the ministers; the Scriptural offices of pastor and deacons; Scriptural polity for the church, viz., a government for the church, of the church, and by the church alone according to God's Word; the Scriptural ordinances, immersion and the Lord's Supper, and that only regenerated

Digitized by Google

church-members who are walking according to the teachings of the Word of God should partake thereof, and we believe, according to God's Word, that our religion should be spiritual, direct, and practical instead of formal, mediative, and creedal.

Upon a platform as comprehensive as God's Word, Pastor Fisher placed his pulpit and preached Jesus to penitent souls. The reason the church progressed so wonderfully was that it had for its foundation, Christ, and for its message, the Word of God. If it would not be too presumptuous, it should be worth while to remark that the Negro Baptist churches and ministers have had abiding success because they have been strong in the faith "delivered once for all to the saints." If there was any preeminent virtue in Rev. Mr. Fisher it was his unflinching proclamation of Scriptural principles wherever he went. He was Baptist born and Baptist bred and at his death was recognized as a Baptist dead.

His emphasis on Bible fundamentals was distributed equally over all forms of endeavor. Even in the home these principles were applied rather strictly. He was the type that did not believe in the social dance, card-parties, and theaters. He certainly did a great deal to denounce these evils among his children, so it is easy to understand how he preached so vehemently against them at the church. Probably for this reason his children did not belong to the social set. As a matter of fact, he did not care about his daughters having callers, although he granted the privilege on any night that

Digitized by Google

there was not some service at the church. Now there was something at the church every night in the week, and on Saturday evening all had to study the Sunday school lesson. Quite strict, indeed! but it seemed to work no alarming hardships.

Once in a while some noble knight did dare to come to the Castle Perilous—but to think of a gentleman of another denomination calling, no matter how chivalrous, was out of the question. His youngest daughter was keeping company with a Methodist gentleman, who came from a family of distinguished churchmen. This was too much for Mr. Fisher. Returning from church one week-night, he found the caller in his parlor. Mrs. Fisher was uneasy, for she knew something was going to happen. And just as she had supposed, Mr. Fisher taking no chance on the penalty of having "two unequally yoked" in his family, politely asked the caller to absent himself and not to call again. With all of this he loved his children and did his utmost to make them mentally efficient for survival in the world struggle.

The application of the Scriptural fundamentals politically and religiously has been stated. How he applied them socially, let us see.

Twenty-seventh and Dearborn Streets was in the center of the most immoral section of Chicago. Painted and noisy prostitutes combed the streets for gold that dropped from the hands of dissipated adulterers. Saloons were on three corners. Chicago

Digitized by Google

YOUNG GIRLS MISSIONARY CIRCLE
Olivet Baptist Church

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

was "wide open." From the brothels were converted useful members.

Conditions were so deplorable that some good church-members occasionally took "a little for the stomach's sake," but Rev. Mr. Fisher's gospel of "bone dry" soon found its way home. Affairs had reached such a shape that on communion Sundays the deacons thought nothing of going to a corner saloon and buying the wine and substituting "Uneeda Biscuit" for the broken body of Christ. An end came to this speedily, and the officers were taught to make and use unfermented wine and unleavened bread. Moreover, instead of many of the members getting their *spirits* up by pouring *spirits* down, they let the dynamic of the Holy Spirit have his way with them. Mayor Edward F. Dunne writes:

June 14, 1905.

Reverend and dear Sir:

Your letter of the tenth instant protesting against the conduct of certain saloon-keepers at Twenty-seventh and Dearborn Streets, to hand. I have referred the same to the General Superintendent of Police with instructions that orders be given to the proprietors of these saloons that they must conduct them in a quiet and orderly manner or their licenses will be revoked.

Very truly yours,

E. F. DUNNE.

Evidently the licenses were revoked, for in less than a year the three dram-shops on Twenty-seventh and Dearborn Streets were changed into thriving Negro

Digitized by Google

businesses. The back door of the saloon on State Street that opened on Twenty-seventh Street was ordered closed, and only the front entrance was allowed to be used.

More and more eyes were turned toward Pastor Fisher and the Baptists. His reputation as an evangelist followed him from the Southland; many requests came for his services. He tried to fill them all, for the salvation of sinners was his purpose in the world. In addition, twice yearly protracted meetings were held in his own church, not counting the evangelistic sermons which were preached from Sunday to Sunday. The marvel of the work in Chicago was how the church progressed so markedly when the pastor was absent nearly a quarter of the time. Undoubtedly, this progress was due to the machinery of organization and to the able assistance rendered by the Rev. George Duncan, the assistant pastor, a prince among Christians, Chairman Stephen A. Griffin and his corps of efficient deacons, and the loyal members.

The National Baptist Convention, with its two million members, accepted an invitation to hold its twenty-fifth annual session in Chicago, September 13-19, 1905, as guest of the Olivet Church. Pastor Fisher knew that this event would do much toward turning the attention of Chicago to Olivet and toward enlightening the public upon the doings of his denomination.

In the meantime, a notable event had taken place in

Digitized by Google

March. Olivet had rented the church for two years, but this year they had made plans to buy. The newspapers flashed the incident throughout the city:

> You have heard about taking the rag off the bush [they began], but that occasion [referring to the burning of the mortgage] took the rag, bush, and all. There were short addresses by Honorables S. B. Turner, E. H. Wright, Beauregard F. Mosely, Master in Chancery T. J. Holes, the Rev. A. Madison, and the Rev. George Duncan, assistant pastor. . . Dr. E. J. Fisher presented the papers showing that settlements had been made and debts paid and to whom, to the amount of $18,103.30. A tray was then placed, and the mortgage papers were handed to Hon. S. B. Turner, who lighted the match and started the fire. The pastor, Doctor Fisher, led in the singing of the hymn "To the Work, To the Work."

The mortgage had been held against the church by M. Morava Vanderpoel and Company since July 22, 1897. It had caused the church to be sold and the congregation to be put out of doors. The event was notable, but no time could be spared to rejoice with such a full program ahead.

The meeting of the National Convention was just a few months distant. A contract was let for the completion of the house of worship at a cost approximating twenty thousand dollars. Workmen were busy night and day getting things in readiness for the convention. An emergency appeal was sent to citizens of Chicago to help financially. Many responded, including Messrs. Frank O. Lowden and George Dixon, the

Digitized by Google

Borden Milk Company, Judges McEwen and Henesy, and Mesdames F. B. Blackstone, O. Powers, and Clifford Johnson. All receipts and disbursements were carefully audited by public accountants, and a statement was mailed to each donor. Moses E. Greenbaum, treasurer of Greenbaum Sons, Bankers, had charge of the affair.

Unfortunately, however, all the work done on the structure would not put it in readiness for the Convention. The auditorium had only the floor and interior finishings ready but no pews. The roof had just been put on temporarily. Olivet could only be used as headquarters for the Convention; Ebenezer Baptist Church accommodated the women, and the men held their meetings in the First Regiment Armory. The program was one of interest, being graced by Dr. Johnston Myers, Mayor Edward F. Dunne, Governor Charles Deneen, the Honorable Judson Lyons, and Booker T. Washington, who needs no title.

The Olivet Church received a tremendous impetus during this session of the National Baptist Convention. It was not difficult, thereafter, for her to hold an advanced position among the bodies of Christians in Chicago. Still, Rev. Mr. Fisher's broad-mindedness and liberality were attracting attention throughout various denominations. One colored brother came to him for aid in starting a separate church in view of founding another denomination. Mr. Fisher, remembering how Providence had broken the chains of slavery and

Digitized by Google

stopped the lash of the whipping-post, deemed it expedient to be loyal to the Word of God, so he sent the brother away with the pert remark, " Negroes have no right being anything but Baptist."

The church was fast nearing completion. The pews arrived early in October, and day and night were utilized in their erection. To the joy of each member and the surprise of the public, the dedicatory services were held the fifteenth of October, 1905. The auditorium seating eighteen hundred was filled to capacity. Everything betokened success. There were two choirs, one in the front of the church, and one in the rear, conducted by his daughters. These choirs alternated in their singing, giving rest and supplement to each other. The membership was divided between several circles or clubs of the church: Queen Esther, Andrewites (later Royal), Pastor's Aid, Helping Hand, Willing Workers, and many others, so that each member could have close association with the others and an exact record could be kept. Also a fraternity, the Brotherhood of Andrew and Peter, and its auxiliary, a sorority, the sisterhood, were well under way. These organizations in time of sickness paid each member four dollars a month and sixty dollars at death, with dues of fifty cents a month. These societies were not secret but were opened to any Christian who would meet bimonthly to read and meditate over God's Word. There were young men's clubs, girls' clubs, and a mothers' union maintained along with the regular Sun-

Digitized by Google

day school and Baptist Young People's Union. The heads of the various auxiliaries constituted a general committee called the Heralds, which met to plan with the pastor the work for each week.

Olivet was rounding into a machine running seven days a week, providing free employment for hundreds, a comfort station for the weary, and divine worship for thousands. The membership responded excellently to the work. In August of 1905, a modern pipe-organ was installed, and Professor W. Alphonso Johnson, the blind prodigy, served as organist and director of the choir, which, under his training, became noted for its harmony. Truly, the growth of the Olivet Church was marvelous. Pastor Fisher, having found an indebtedness of twenty-eight thousand five hundred dollars, and having completed the church house at an additional cost of seventeen thousand five hundred dollars, succeeded in leading the people in paying off all but fourteen thousand five hundred dollars of the debt in four years. The membership in 1903 was about six hundred; he had preached the gospel to thousands, garnering thirteen hundred more for the kingdom. With all of the number taken in he could remember each by name.

The debt was arranged for by the trustees on the following articles of agreement:

ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT made this first day of February, A. D. 1907, between Baptist City Mission Society, a corporation organized and existing under and by virtue of

Digitized by Google

the laws of the State of Illinois, of the City of Chicago, party of the first part, and Olivet Baptist Church, a religious corporation, of the State of Illinois, of the City of Chicago, party of the second part:

Witnesseth, That ..... the said party of the second part hereby covenants and agrees to pay the sum of Eleven Thousand Nine Hundred and Sixty-eight Dollars ($11,968), in the manner following: $300 on executing this agreement, the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged; $1,000 on March 1, 1907; $1,657 on September 1, 1907; $1,621 on March 1, 1908; $1,210 on September 1, 1908; and $6,180 on March 1, 1909.

It is worth while here to note that the Olivet Church did not fail to pay back all of the money promptly; she thereby established a confidence in Negro Baptists that has remained unshaken to this day. As a result, the white Baptists of Chicago have expended more money on needy Negro Baptist enterprises of Chicago than those of any other city in the nation. Recently they put sixty-five thousand dollars cash into one Negro Baptist church.

Just as needy churches now feel that many burdens have been lifted by timely help from the white Baptists, so the congregation of Olivet then felt assured of the further advancement of the church. Attention could be turned to surrounding conditions. The winters were becoming very severe; people were destitute with scant food and clothing. Unemployment was everywhere. The church missionaries tried to relieve the situation in a large way. The "Chicago Tri-

Digitized by Google

bune " for February 8, 1908, has this article under the caption, NEGROES' CHURCH AIDS NEEDY:

A daily rebuke to those who shirk their share in the burden of charitable work this winter is to be found at the Olivet Baptist Church, Twenty-seventh and Dearborn Streets, where a debt-burdened congregation of colored people is feeding daily fifty to seventy-five destitute men, women, and children, about half of whom are white.

The work was begun last Sunday when the Rev. E. J. Fisher, pastor of the church, . . told his congregation they ought to do something to help the unemployed.

Tuesday morning a sign was hung out welcoming all penniless men, and, though the church is in the center of the black belt, the first three persons to be fed were white men. Since then the ratio of whites and colored has been about equal. The white men at first seemed loath to accept the offered hospitality, but hunger conquered prejudice and most of the men have left vowing to remember the church in a substantial way when they get on their feet. . .

" When we saw the magnificent work done by the ' Tribune ' in lightening the burden of the unemployed, and when we knew of the many cases, in our midst, of destitution and of inability to obtain work," said Doctor Fisher, " we thought surely the church should not be outdone by a newspaper. Therefore, we have in a humble way joined in the work."

Not only in this work but in charitable pursuits in general did he lead his church. Especially, was this true in reference to the many smaller churches in the city and State. Many of the churches were successful after Rev. Mr. Fisher recommended a man to them. Mr. Samuel Sisson, a life-long admirer and friend, ac-

Digitized by Google

GROW! GROW! GROW!

Kindergarten Children Getting their Daily Milk

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

cepted the pastorate of the Saint Paul Church in Hyde Park and later accepted a call to the church at Danville. Central Church was a store front on State Street, but under the Rev. G. M. Mason, a brother pastor of Mr. Fisher in Nashville, secured a commodious building. The Rev. R. L. Darden, of Georgia, was recommended to the Providence Church on the West Side. Through a misunderstanding the congregation divided; Mr. Darden pastored one faction, and Rev. Dr. S. L. M. Francis was recommended to the other. The Rev. E. T. Martin was recommended to the Bethesda Church and successfully led the people from worship in a store to a beautiful church home on Wabash Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street. The Rev. S. A. Mathis was called to the Friendship Church on the West Side. A church was organized at Glencoe, and the Rev. George Duncan, the successful assistant pastor of Olivet, was elected to take charge. The church at Evanston had been in confusion. The Rev. I. A. Thomas, of Georgia, was recommended as pastor and peacemaker. He remained a friend of his sponsor and succeeded in erecting a modern edifice to house one of the most powerful congregations in the State of Illinois. The Second Church at Joliet was built by his friend, Rev. Mr. Curtwright, after the design of the Olivet structure. Many other cities still enjoy the effects of his generous interest. On the whole, there were few colored churches in Chicago or vicinity that have not been helped morally or financially by

Digitized by Google

Olivet under Pastor Fisher. Not all of those whom he has helped have been grateful; not all of them admit their obligation; only a few remembered the bridge that carried them over, but as often as he would be daggered by the subjects of his benevolence, just so often would he forgive and forget. "Certainly virtue is like precious odors, most fragrant when they are incensed and crushed; for prosperity doth best discover vice, but adversity doth best discover virtue."

The Rev. Elijah Fisher was born to show what human powers, unaided by anything saving culture and goodness, may achieve, even when these powers are displayed amidst the competition and jealousy of public life. Not to be misunderstood, note that it is not intended to assert that if a man exert himself to the utmost there is no height he cannot reach. This is not true, for ambition cannot be substituted for intuition, nor effort develop genius, nor intensity of will produce power of mind. As well might a butterfly hope by persistent strivings to outsoar the eagle, the sloth to rival a Man-O'-War in fleetness, or the ant to acquire the size of the elephant. Innate ability is needed. The resultant, therefore, of this innate ability and everlasting *at-it-ness* is greatness. Pastor Fisher's works did not make him great, they simply revealed that attribute.

His greatness was evinced primarily in the field of religion, as an organizer and church builder, but in other lines he was none the less conspicuous because

Digitized by Google

of his ability and many endeavors. The answers to some questions sent him might serve to exhibit Pastor Fisher as a lover of his race, e. g.:

1. Do you believe that every revised Constitution of the Southern States which disfranchises Negro citizens is advantageous to the Negro as an American citizen?

ANS. *There is no advantage to be had by the Negroes in any Southern State where disfranchisement exists because they are deprived of rights which this government guarantees.*

2. Should the Negro ask for or be satisfied with less of the American citizenship rights than other citizens?

ANS. *The Negro should be contented only with every right that belongs to an American citizen and should be satisfied with nothing less.*

3. Do you think it proper to advise the Negro to give up his contention for civil and political rights and be content to work and get a bank-account?

ANS. *A bank-account is only guaranteed by civil and political rights, which must be contended for by the Negro and by other American citizens.*

4. Do you believe that the Negro is so peculiarly constituted that he cannot be benefitted by the treatment accorded other citizens?

ANS. *The Negro is like other people. The same endowment and treatment benefitting them will benefit him.*

5. Do you believe a Negro man should be regarded as a safe and capable leader of the race who is silent on lynching (except to palliate it and excuse it in the Southern States) and other outrages against the Negro?

ANS. *Since lynching is a violation of the law no man should keep silent at its violation and especially as a leader whose brother is the victim.*

Digitized by Google

6. Do you believe the Negro of Illinois or any part of this country, will be helped by any leading or public Negroes conceding the inferiority of the race?

ANS. *I do not, but, on the contrary, the race will be greatly injured.*

7. Is a man a proper and acceptable leader of the Negro who publicly boasts to the white people that he teaches Negro women how to work on the farm?

ANS. *No, that is, if he boasts of nothing higher.*

8. Do you believe, taken as a whole, the young Negro should be given the same sort of education which best fits the youth of other races for all avenues and professions of life?

ANS. *I believe that whatever it has taken to make the youths of other people great it will take the same to make the youths of the Negroes their equals.*

9. Do you believe the Negro as a race should be trained only for menial labor and industrial pursuits?

ANS. *No, but trained for every avenue of life.*

10. Do you believe that the teaching of Booker T. Washington has in a large measure been responsible for the increase of mob violence and lynching of Negroes?

ANS. *I do not believe that Booker T. Washington is at all responsible for any of the lynching and, yet, in my judgment, he has not spoken out in unmistakable terms against it as he might.*

11. How do you account for Mr. Washington's silence on the state of second slavery or peonage in his own State and at his door where hundreds of ignorant Negroes are found to be in worse slavery than before the Civil War?

ANS. *I think the silence of Mr. Washington on the second slavery or peonage question in his State simply means to say that while in the way with thine adversary agree with him quickly.*

Digitized by Google

12. Is Booker T. Washington's popularity as a leader increasing or diminishing among Negroes?

ANS. *I do not know whether Mr. Washington is increasing or decreasing as a leader among Negroes.*

It is not very hard to obtain Mr. Fisher's point of view on the problem that is still paramount in the forums of public opinion. His position was not entirely conservative nor radical, but it savored of both, leaning, however, toward radicalism. He had abiding confidence in the people whom he essayed to lead. He believed firmly in the enforcement of every righteous law of the land. Still, he was careful not to make statements that would smack of injury to the reputation of a leadership established through suffering, toil, and woe, and honored by men of every color. To do so would be to commit the same offense against others which his less charitable brethren were guilty of as touching him. However, if he was not correct in his judgments, he was at least consistent in his thinking. People have always followed a consistent and positive leadership. On all matters pertaining to the Negro his position was not negative but positive.

Many Negroes of Chicago appreciated this fact. It was a common occurrence for him to sit on the church steps evenings about six o'clock waiting to talk to the laborers as they returned from work. From ten to twenty persons were always in attendance.

Gertrude Lillian Fisher-Brown, who had been a great help in the church, died March 4, 1908. The

Digitized by Google

funeral was delayed several days because Mr. Fisher established a custom of not having Sunday displays. To purchase a burial lot in Oakwoods Cemetery it was necessary to pay considerably more than if she had been white. What caused the difference God only knows, but Rev. Mr. Fisher resolved from that day to have a cemetery for his own people. Mount Glenwood Cemetery Association was advertising for colored stockholders. He bought several shares of stock but withdrew from active participation in the company after finding that the concern was controlled by white people. He called Undertakers Charles S. Jackson, Daniel Jackson, George O. Jones, Clifford Johnson, Dr. George C. Hall, the Rev. Dr. S. L. M. Francis, and Messrs. S. A. Griffin, R. M. Johnson, and W. H. Terrell together and laid plans for the purchase of beautiful Mount Forest Cemetery in the suburbs of Chicago. Today, this resting-place is a landmark along the course of Mr. Fisher, and it is used and kept up almost wholly by the ever-increasing number who die as members of the Olivet Church.

The purpose of the following remarks is not to rehearse the views of Pastor Fisher nor to vindicate the legitimacy of the conclusions which he reached, but rather by some notes to show his further attitude toward good government. He was partisan. He had no hesitancy in endorsing those candidates whose past record appealed to him and whose attitude toward the Negro was seemingly fair.

Digitized by Google

Dear Dr. Fisher: August 17, 1908.

I thank you cordially for your letter of congratulations of the eleventh instant and assure you that the sentiments expressed therein are highly appreciated by me. It is indeed a pleasure to receive such as yours. Your good will and support were of great advantage to me.

With best wishes, I am

Yours truly,

C. S. DENEEN.

The last paragraph of the next letter from the Chairman of the Republican National Committee, who was later Secretary of Commerce and Labor in the cabinet of President Taft, shows with what constancy he labored for the Republican Party and for his race:

ST. LOUIS, November 2, 1908.

Dr. E. J. Fisher,
Twenty-seventh and Dearborn Streets,
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Doctor:

I have your letter of October 31 and am gratified to have your expression of confidence and satisfaction with what I undertook to do.

It gives me great pleasure to reciprocate, and to say to you that your support from the start to the end of the campaign has not only been a matter of encouragement to me personally, but has been accepted as an effective contribution to the general results which will, no doubt, be a triumph for the Republican Party, and through it, for your race.

Very respectfully yours,

CHARLES NAGLE.

Digitized by Google

He was solicitous, too, about the mistreatment of his people in all sections of the country. The church sent a petition to President Roosevelt concerning the Brownsville affair. Governor Deneen respecting the Springfield lawlessness writes:

The mob violence here has been suppressed, and the machinery of the law is in operation. Thirty-eight persons have been indicted, and I have been informed that there will be about fifty others indicted. Their trials will begin about the first day of next term, which will be within two weeks. I believe that speedy justice will be meted out to those who disgraced our city.

Digitized by Google

VII

ON UNKNOWN SEAS

1910-19

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

ON UNKNOWN SEAS

1910-1912

The National Baptist Convention in its regular session at Columbus, Ohio, September 19, 1909, elected a delegation, of which Rev. Mr. Fisher was chairman, to sit in the World's Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. This honor offered an opportunity for travel which had never come to him before. The opportunity indeed was not so unusual as in times gone by and yet even now the number of clergy who make the voyage is small in comparison with those who aspire to the opportunity. The greatness of the occasion consisted in the opportunity it afforded for travel, the largeness of his mission, and the prominence of the position held by him. These facts are worthy of space here, but the things that the conference discussed and the movements of the party are mentioned by him in the only diary he kept.

On May 23, 1910, a "friendship parting" was given by the Olivet Church for Pastor Fisher. The following Saturday he arrived in New York. He spent the Sunday preaching for the Rev. Dr. A. M. Gilbert, pastor of the Mount Olive Baptist Church. The days following were full of business cares and final preparation for the welcome journey.

Digitized by Google

SATURDAY, June 4, 1910.

We came aboard the Arabic, White Star Line, at 8.45 a. m. Room 175, berth 2, was assigned to me. Lunch was served at 10.45. We then registered so as to get our assignments at the table. Number 43 was mine. Rev. Dr. F. L. Lights, of Houston, Texas, sat opposite me. Rev. H. R. Harrison, of Atlanta, Georgia, sat at the end, and Rev. Wesley, of Texarkana, Texas, sat near me. The remainder of our table was white. . . The day was spent in meeting the many passengers and in making acquaintances. The sea was calm during the greater portion of the day. Later in the afternoon the winds arose, and many of the party found themselves a little sea-sick. By suppertime many were in bed. Some went to supper but were not able to eat.

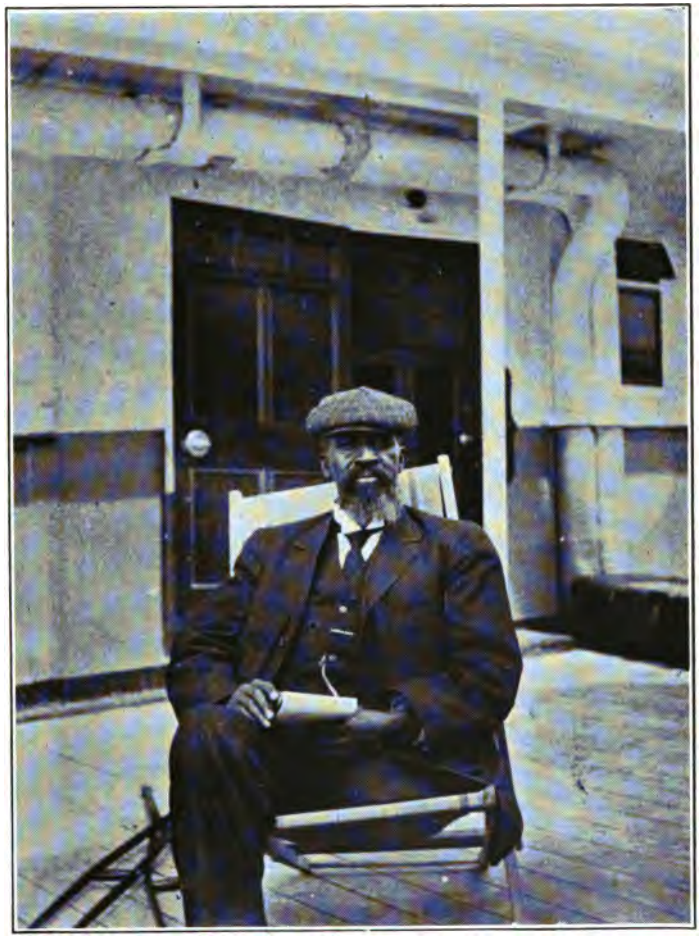
Monday morning still found many sick and unable to get out of bed. The sea was still rough. Our party was fifteen hundred strong, the large majority Irish. Some were dancing, some playing heads and tails, some doing one thing after another, while many were calling for the doctor on every hand. I was among that number. Doctor Bacote was much worse off than I.

Tuesday morning found most of us up and ready for breakfast on time. . . We were now nearing mid-ocean and were beginning to turn our attention from New York to Liverpool. Then the thought of the great beyond flashed into my mind—how we span life's ocean looking to the great beyond "forgetting those things which are behind." At 7.30 we had a song service led by Rev. Skipworth, of New York, and myself.

WEDNESDAY.

The weather was very warm and the sea calm. We were all sitting watching the vaulted sky and the deep blue sea.

Digitized by Google



ELIJAH JOHN FISHER
At Sea

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

FRIDAY.

You could see the grade in the Atlantic and the seeming hill in the ocean. Our attention was called to a large number of flying-fish and porpoises after them. At 7.30 there was a benefit concert for the Seamen's Orphanage at New York and Liverpool. I was the leading character in the affair. We had lunch at 9.00 o'clock and retired for the night.

On Saturday the fog became so dense that the whistle was compelled to blow every two or three minutes to prevent other vessels from colliding. This was kept up all night. The ship was compelled to stop as many as a half dozen times.

Mr. Fisher wrote briefly of the last days of the journey.

SUNDAY.

The morning brought us in touch with each other again after the ringing of the first bell. After breakfast we attended the services of the Church of England, in keeping with the occasion. We reached Queenstown at 3.30, where many passengers disembarked. Shamrock Lighthouse, forts, and ships were in full view. Leaving Queenstown we moved up the St. George's Channel toward Scotland with Ireland on one side of us and Wales on the other. At 8 p. m., we had a regular church service. Dr. W. W. Brown was at the piano, and I led in the singing. Dr. F. L. Lights led in prayer. Dr. P. James Bryant, of Atlanta, Georgia, preached a most excellent sermon.

The next stop was at Liverpool where the delegation disembarked. The party remained there only a few hours getting not a daylight glimpse of England's great seaport. They boarded the train for Edinburgh

Digitized by Google

arriving in time to get a little sleep before the opening of the conference on Monday.

The conference continued from June 14 to June 23 and proved a source of inspiration to Mr. Fisher and delegation. Not only were the themes of Professor Beach, of Yale University, Doctors McEwen, Borden, and MacAlpine, Hon. William Jennings Bryan, and others, covering the entire field of missionary activity, very helpful, but the close association with leading men of the world, both lay and clergy, such as John R. Mott, Hon. Seth Low, Drs. Robert E. Speer, J. Campbell Morgan, Stalker, Zwemer, Professor Patterson, Lord Balfour of Burleigh, and hundreds more, was duly appreciated by Pastor Fisher as he showed by his missionary zeal on his return.

Not much time could be taken from the conference for seeing Scotia's famous capital, although glimpses now and then were gained of the place Sir Walter Scott calls "mine own romantic town." Mr. Fisher visited on Tuesday John Knox's dwelling, Hume's birthplace, and Lord Erskine's house. Securing a guide he visited Holyrood Palace and saw the suite of Lord Darnley with its gorgeous tapestries and rare portraits.

Each day a little of the attractive and romantic was seen. He told of his visit to Abbotsford, where the keys of Lochleven Castle and the ancient Tolbooth abide. Many rare things, weapons and books, were here—Napoleon's pistol, Scott's sword, pistol, and

Digitized by Google

gun, and Rob Roy's sword and gun. He bought two coats for his daughters, a brooch for his wife, a book of Burns' poetry, and many souvenirs. In the Burg of Northumbrian Edwin, Mr. Fisher with his crutches and blackness was an attraction to many children. They would follow him from place to place for an opportunity to feel his hand to find out if he was painted or to ask him if he had been born that way. In Scotland the Negro was a novelty.

He left Scotia's capital Thursday evening. The hour-and-a-half ride to Glasgow was full of historic interest, the city being very near to Stirling and Dunfermline, " where Bruce and several Scottish monarchs lie buried." Many important places were to be seen, including George's Square, containing historic statuary, and Bishop Tumbull's School. He writes:

> Edinburgh and Glasgow have very fine schools. All of the Scotch people can read and write. Every parent seems anxious to have his child go to college.

After a few hours' visiting he crossed the North Channel to Ireland, stopping first at Belfast. By train he then passed to Dublin, the seat of Trinity College, where Oliver Goldsmith and Dean Swift were students. Mr. Fisher remarks:

> Here you see Phœnix Park, which the Irish say is the finest pleasure resort in the world. Cricket and golf are great sports in this place.

Digitized by Google

Again he set out for Liverpool to get a daylight glimpse of the home town of Mesdames Hemans and Oliphant and of William Roscoe and Gladstone. It was worth while to be in the city where Nathaniel Hawthorne had resided as American consul and to see the free libraries and picture-galleries, the palatial-looking piles of office buildings, built of hewn stone in the Italian Renaissance style, Sefton Park, St. George's Hall, and the statue of Queen Victoria and Lord Beaconsfield's and Wellington's monuments.

As in other places our traveler did not remain long but took train for the British metropolis, London. "We hired a cab and made our way to the European Hotel, where we again joined our delegation from America." He narrates very little concerning London as the few hours there were spent in rest at the hotel.

"At 8.30 p. m., we made our way to the station where we boarded the train for Paris." He relates in his diary nothing of his ride through fertile Kent to Dover, his cross of the Pas-de-Calais and subsequent travel to Paris. Here he is brief and states that the party had breakfast at the Tourist Hotel.

> We retired for two hours. We luncheoned at one, then made a three-hour auto tour of that great city. We then returned to our hotel and after a little rest went out again through portions of the city we had not seen.

Not until he returned home did he tell of the magnanimity of the French people, the Champs de Mars,

Digitized by Google

Eiffel Tower, the lights of the boulevards blazing from the Place de la Concorde to the column in the Place de la Bastille. He summed up his description as follows: "We saw the city apparently as it was, full of wickedness and sin." Speaking further he says:

Sunday morning we took a stroll through the park across the Seine River until we had reached the Baptist church. The pastor was absent in Edinburgh, but his wife was holding the fort. After church we spent the rest of the day going from place to place. We retired early.

Monday morning we left Paris in company with Doctors Lights and Wesley of Texas. We made our way to the station and were soon off for Brussels. We arrived here at 4.30 in the afternoon and made our way with a guide to the Morties Hotel. We had dinner, went for a short walk, and retired with a view to rising early the next morning. This we did, and with an interpreter we toured the city. We were taken to the palace where King Leopold had lived, but behold, the King of kings had called him thence to give an account of his stewardship.

He also related seeing the Hotel de Ville in the lower and less healthy part of the city where a painting of Attila's defeat at Châlons is especially striking; the mansion opposite where Egmont and Horn were confined the night before their death, a statue of Godfrey of Bouillon and a more modern sight, the World Exposition.

The World Exposition was going on in this city, and people and things were here from every part of the globe. The exhibits were truly wonderful. We met several Africans.

Digitized by Google

The attraction, however, was the American Negro attending an exposition in Brussels, not as a servant but as a visitor. We were approached by many who asked whence we came and what was our business. Many inquirers had never seen people of our color before.

After two days our travelers were back in London, having an opportunity to see Buckingham Palace, the British Museum, Saint Paul's Cathedral with its tombs of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Dr. Samuel Johnson, Lord Nelson, the Duke of Wellington and others, the Tower of London conspicuous for its long list of political prisoners, the Thames Embankment, and Westminster Abbey of coronation fame and memorial to early English kings, patriots, and poets from Chaucer to Dickens.

He set sail from Liverpool on July 2. Pastor Fisher was tendered a banquet on his return by his church, the mission society taking the leading part. At this time, with the aid of a stereopticon, he related more in detail the places visited, the things he had heard, and the sum total of the conference.

The result was plainly evident. The Rev. James H. Wilson and wife, members of the Olivet Baptist Church, were sent on the twenty-seventh of December, 1910, to take charge of the Bethel Baptist Church, Demarara, South America. Mr. Fisher became an enthusiast over missions. Dr. L. G. Jordan, Secretary of the Foreign Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention, was invited to the church to speak espe-

Digitized by Google

cially on the work of his board. In the midst of Doctor Jordan's passionate plea for Africa, Pastor Fisher arose and stated that he would give his horse and buggy to the cause. His wife objected strenuously when she heard of the affair, and Mr. Fisher contented himself with making a donation to the cause of missions. Probably the idea of a fiery mare and buggy traveling from Chicago to Africa was ridiculous! But Rev. Mr. Fisher was determined to do a good deal for missions in general and Africa in particular. He offered to help Eben S. V. Koti, an African student in the State University at Louisville, Kentucky, when he was prepared to sail. Mr. Koti acknowledged his indebtedness:

> I have learned from the Rev. T. W. Longwood that you were prepared to send me some money to buy a horse. Twenty pounds is the estimate to get a pony out there. Indeed I cannot find words to express my gratitude and indebtedness for your kindness to me.

In the fall of 1910, Mr. Fisher attended for his twenty-third consecutive meeting the National Baptist Convention in its annual session in New Orleans, Louisiana. While there he was thrown from the step of a street-car on to the ground. The accident was serious and left its marks on his body. He was brought home in a weakened and much perturbed condition. At first his condition was considered lightly by his family, and it was thought that a few days' rest

Digitized by Google

would again see him in good condition. According to his custom, he called in several of the young physicians to encourage them in their work. The accident was only the occasion of his illness, the cause being grief over the loss of his daughter and worry over the pangs of leadership. A specialist was called in, and in a few days recovery was assured.

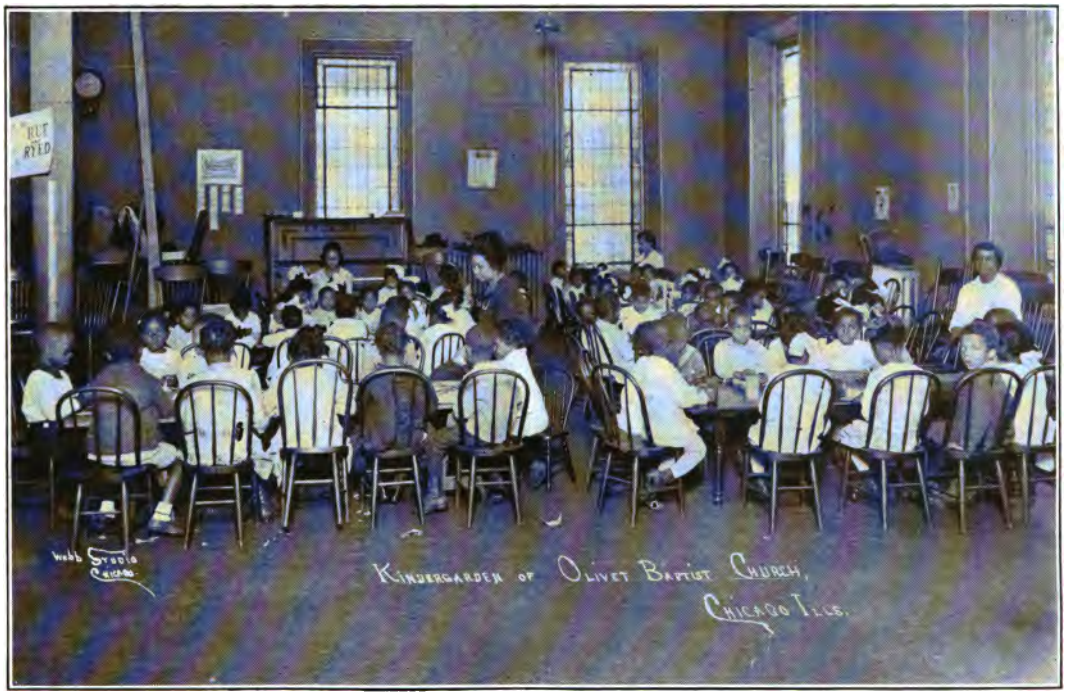
Once again he took his accustomed place at the helm of the church. The membership had increased to thirty-one hundred, and his was easily the largest Protestant congregation North of Mason and Dixon's Line. He immediately turned his attention to the election of good men to office. He never had warmer friends nor more staunch admirers than Congressmen Martin B. Madden and W. A. Rodenberg.

October 3, 1910.

My dear Doctor:

Mr. Rodenberg and I were in Chicago on last Friday and called at the Republican National Congressional Committee Headquarters and requested Colonel Casson to assign you for two days in our district. We would like to have you on Friday and Saturday, October 28 and 29. The meeting on Saturday, October 29, will be at East St. Louis in the city hall, and we will try to make this meeting as successful as the one which was held in the hall two years ago. You will probably recall that in addition to yourself we did expect to have Mr. Vernon, but he was unable to reach the city in time. We will probably have Mr. Vernon at this meeting on the 29th, and you will certainly have to be in good trim if you expect to make a better impression than you did two years ago, because, with-

Digitized by Google



KINDERGARTEN, OLIVET BAPTIST CHURCH

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

out any flattery, it is a fact that many of our citizens are still mindful of the manner in which you raised the roof.

I will leave for East St. Louis tomorrow evening, and I would appreciate it if you would advise me at the earliest possible moment whether or not we can depend upon you for the two dates above mentioned, October 28 and 29.

With sincere good wishes, I am

Yours very truly,

EDW. E. MILLER.

Mr. Fisher accepted the invitation. The result was that Mr. Rodenberg was again seated in Congress, where he served as Chairman of the Committee on Industrial Arts and Expositions.

November 15, 1910.

My dear Doctor Fisher:

Now that the election is over, I desire to take this opportunity of expressing to you my sincere appreciation for the splendid work done by yourself in this congressional district. Your speeches at East St. Louis, Brooklyn, and Alton did much to induce our voters to vote the straight Republican ticket, and were the means of arousing a good deal of party enthusiasm. I hope we will be so fortunate as to have you with us again during the next campaign two years hence. In the meantime if I can be of service to you, I trust you will not hesitate to write me.

With kindest regard from Mr. Miller and myself, I remain

Yours very truly,

W. A. RODENBERG.

His main exploits were not in the field of politics but religion. Still he realized the thought of Doctor Rau-

Digitized by Google

schenbusch that "under the warm breath of religious faith all institutions became plastic."

He found time this year to serve as trustee of many institutions of education in connection with carrying on the work of a growing church. Many activities were claiming his attention and aid. Dr. Booker T. Washington visited him during the winter and gave an appreciated address to a crowded house. The campaign for a colored branch of the Young Men's Christian Association in Chicago was at fever heat. Churches, clubs, and individuals were responding nobly. On January 16, 1911, Olivet subscribed sixteen hundred dollars. Pastor Fisher's general opinion of the Association was that, if the church was doing her duty, George Williams would have had no occasion for its foundation. We might glean his view on such an organization from his sermon on "The Church, the Pillar and Stay of Truth":

> The church has a mission that no other organization can accomplish. No other society in the world can be substituted for it. Were the attempt made to combine all the noble aims, to consolidate all the excellent characteristics that are claimed by all the organizations now existing in the world, into one, in itself a complete, yet merely human organization, it could not fill the place now occupied by the church of God. . . Some ennobling aspects of truth for the uplifting of mankind may be engrafted into some of them, some work of beneficence and succor to the unfortunate and suffering of the race may be accomplished by many of them, but all they can legitimately claim to stand for of good to mankind in the world is but a

Digitized by Google

scintillation, a pale reflection of the many-sided truth for which the Christian church stands. Truth full-orbed with power of life, with the years of eternity before it, beams forth from the church. The power of her truth gives sight to the blind, healing to the sick, cleansing to the filthy, and life to the dead. Within her home a new and higher life is born, for her Head has said, "Except a man be born of the water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Pastor Fisher was willing to use his good offices to encourage any worthy movement whether it was fostered by white or black, Methodist or Baptist; his only inquiry being, Is the cause a meritorious one?

His services were constantly in demand as a revivalist. He was always glad to conduct meetings in the South. Often did he go to his old pastorates in Nashville and Atlanta to conduct meetings. It must have been great joy to return to his former pastorate in Atlanta, whose pastor had been ordained by him and was now serving in a large way.

One of the most helpful meetings conducted in Atlanta was at the Wheat Street Baptist Church, of which the Rev. Dr. P. James Bryant was pastor. The two were spoken of as the "Modern Paul and Silas." By way of advertisement this statement was issued by the press:

Doctor Fisher is preaching the gospel in a simple, convincing, and unanswerable manner. His clarion voice in gospel and song is now like trumpet-blasts, then like a mighty cyclone, and then again akin to the dove and nightingale.

Digitized by Google

Atlanta! Yes, Atlanta, the city of sunlight, love, and sorrow, with its magnolia trees making fragrant the walks over which they had blossomed for years; its picturesque red hills and palatial residences were beautiful indeed, but more delightful than scenic nature were the trees of righteousness "planted by the rivers of waters," lifting their branches in air and being assured of their place in divine mansions on high.

Mr. Fisher's evangelistic tendencies were national. From a note to his sister, Mrs. S. A. Brown, of Newnan, Georgia, he refers to a recent revival conducted in January. "I have been to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," he said, "conducting a ten-days' meeting for Dr. H. W. Childs. Over a hundred were converted."

He was equally fitted for the work of an evangelist or a pastor, but the pulpit at Olivet Church was his throne, and there he reigned over a willing people. His congregation expressed a desire to make the fifty-eighth anniversary of the church a telling success. The program extended from July 31 through August 6, 1911, and was graced by many of the city pastors and by the Rev. Frank L. Anderson, D. D., Dr. E. P. Johnson, of Atlanta, Georgia, and the Rev. T. L. Griffith, President of the Western Baptist Convention, of which Mr. Fisher was a life member.

Olivet by this time was a machine which could roll along with any good engineer. It was so constituted as not only to take care of its three thousand members but of all who might wish to join. Pastor Fisher knew

Digitized by Google

this and could branch out more and more into other fields of religious endeavor.

He represented the National Baptist Convention at the World's Alliance at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and attended other meetings all over the country, always putting Olivet to the front as a representative Negro and Christian organization.

Ever since the organization of the National Educational Congress, he was appointed as a delegate by the Governor of the State. Governor Deneen in appointing him a delegate for 1912 says:

I have been requested to appoint delegates to the National Negro Educational Congress, to be held at St. Paul, Minnesota, July 15-19, 1912. Accordingly, I am pleased to appoint you a delegate to this Congress. I enclose herewith a copy of letter addressed to me by the Hon. Adolph O. Eberhart, Governor of Minnesota, in regard to the Congress.

STATE OF MINNESOTA
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
St. Paul.
ADOLPH O. EBERHART, Governor.

March 26, 1912.

Hon. Chas. S. Deneen,
Governor of Illinois,
Springfield, Ill.

My dear Governor:

The Negro National Educational Congress will hold its annual session in the city of St. Paul, Minnesota, July 15-19, 1912.

Digitized by Google

The object of this organization is:

To raise the standard of Negro citizenship in the United States;

To instill in the youth of this race higher ideals of manhood and womanhood, a greater respect for law and a love for honest toil, economy, and thrift.

You have no doubt in your State many worthy Negroes whose united effort along the above lines would result in great good for the race, and it is from among this class that I would ask you to appoint a suitable delegation to this convention and advise me of such appointment.

The movement is a worthy one and I trust that you will lend it your support.

Very truly yours,

ADOLPH O. EBERHART, *Governor.*

Mr. J. R. White, the chairman of the committee of the movement, sent a letter on April 27, 1912, complimenting Rev. Mr. Fisher on his appointment and stating that "your Governor will appoint any man or woman that you may recommend, and I trust that Illinois will make a good showing in this coming meeting and carry off the banner."

The relation between Pastor Fisher and Governor Deneen was not caused wholly by their close association in political affairs, but was built on service rendered mankind in the past and greater opportunities for advancement in the future. This must be true, for even during Democratic administrations, in which Rev. Mr. Fisher was never actively interested, appointments came to him.

Digitized by Google

October 4, 1913.

Dear Sir:

I have the honor to appoint you a delegate to attend the celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation at Exposition Hall, Atlantic City, New Jersey, October 6-13, 1913.

Very truly yours,

E. F. DUNNE, *Governor.*

Rev. Mr. Fisher had big ideas not only in church, city, State, and national ways but in international relations. What his ultimate aim was nobody knows, but from correspondence dated April 18, 1912, with Albert A. Ipso, Ansah Province of Ashanti, whom he met in London—he must have favored a wise, sober movement designed to bring about a proper race-consciousness and closer relationships between the hundreds of millions of darker peoples of the whole world.

Reverting to our conversation some time ago when you were here, with reference to the drawing closer together of the American members of our race and those of us on the West Coast of Africa, I think this can be accomplished by our being brought together in commercial relations. The advantage of this would lie in the intercourse which will follow and make us better acquainted with each other.

This idea was good, the purpose unselfish, and the motive very helpful, but in the strength of Mr. Fisher's love for his race lay his apparent weakness. People had heard him repeat his motto, " Be somebody, do

Digitized by Google

something, have something," and took advantage especially of the last link. He paid little attention to the whims of the people. To show that some of the goods of this world were needed to prove the usefulness of men, he humorously told a story of an old Negro who owned a farm on both sides of the Chattahoochee River in Georgia and Alabama.

His business grew to such proportions [said Mr. Fisher] that he employed other men to run the farm while he ferried people from one side of the river to the other. One day a white man came along and wanted to cross but had no money. The white brother said that he would pay when he returned. The wise old colored man replied, " No boss, if a man hain't got money nuff to pay his way cross dis shere riber, he ain't got no business on the other side, fur he is just as much service on one side as he is on the other."

Schemers and designing men knew that this sentiment was characteristic of Mr. Fisher's life, and whenever a new project came up they sought him. A Negro settlement was to be started in Gary, Indiana, whereupon Pastor Fisher bought a block of property which upon investigation was found to be entirely submerged in water. He took shares in a Negro mining concern which has never been heard of since. In this time of money stringency and the cost of high living, we look at a receipt for four hundred dollars " for stock issued Rev. Fisher " by a Negro coal and oil company, and today we are still smelling the fumes of *cold* " gas."

Digitized by Google

KINDERGARTEN CLOSING
Elizabeth McCormick Fund Exhibit

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

This was not all, for he spent considerable money in trying to foster Negro business. He conceived an idea of a print-shop in which all churches would cooperate in having all their printing done. He invested, but no other ministers joined. He and three lay partners carried on the enterprise for about a year; his investment, however, was always an expense account, so he withdrew. The need of a first-class drug-store was prominent in his mind. Accordingly he contracted for the purchase of a two-story brick building at 2701 South State Street, opened a drug-store, and rented the second floor for offices. Having no one to look after his interests he sold the drug outfit. Rev. Mr. Fisher then let his store to the White House Candy Company. The company was not successful, and Mr. Fisher decided to refrain from further business undertakings. In all of his investments he was at least logical, if not financially successful. He did not generalize from one or more particulars, but kept putting his faith in men only to find that many deceived him. At the rate he was going, confident in the honesty of all partners in business, he could have lived to the end of time only to find that it was as easy to apply Christ's principles to business as to change flour into wheat.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

VIII

PRECIOUS CARGOES FROM MANY PORTS

1912-1915

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

PRECIOUS CARGOES FROM MANY PORTS

1912-1915

Late in 1912 Rev. Mr. Fisher conceived the idea of a religious school for the Baptist denomination in Chicago. Objections were coming fast. "Jim-Crowism!" Why then have Negro churches? Was a school needed? Certainly the educational program of the Negro Sunday school teacher was inadequate; she needed training. What of missionaries for home and foreign lands? The ministerial aspirants who had neither time nor money to go from the black belt, those whose preliminary work was too elementary for a divinity school—what of them? He made the attempt with a "child of faith without endowment or donors," giving the church as headquarters for the Chicago Religious Training Seminary, having for its object "the preparation along the lines of Christian service." One hundred pupils took advantage of the courses offered in English, Theology, Music, Missionary and Sunday School Work. Rev. Mr. Fisher and a few ministers of the city conducted this promising institution day and night for eleven months in the year. As President, Mr. Fisher taught a class but was also

Digitized by Google

a pupil in the school of adversity. George Crabbe was correct in stating that "individuals are envious of the rank, wealth, and honors of each other." Mr. Fisher did not fail to garner a goodly measure of that higher criticism, spoken of by Thackeray as pertaining to Henry Esmond,

> which neither books nor years will give, but which some men get from the silent teaching of adversity; she is a great schoolmistress, as many a poor fellow knows that has held his hand out to her ferrule and whimpered over his lesson before her awful chair.

Mr. Fisher was a pioneer in this field, but he knew full well that he had instituted a system that must prevail even in Chicago if heresies are to be counteracted and churches are to do more effective work. This conclusion was not a mere notion, but was the reflection of forty-nine years of service in the Baptist church. Morehouse College, formerly Atlanta Baptist Seminary, his alma mater, conferred the degree of Doctor of Divinity upon him at its commencement exercises in 1912.

The Seminary in Chicago had grown to over two hundred students. It had purchased a beautiful seminary home at 3333 Wabash Avenue. Doctor Fisher had less time to devote to the theoretical side of the school, so he began to devote all of his time to a practical ministry. He, therefore, served only as trustee. The school prospered well under President Curtwright, and was day by day making bids for a perma-

Digitized by Google

nent place among the institutions of Chicago. The "Chicago Tribune," making an appeal for funds, states that "it has been endorsed by the Association of Commerce."

The church was still moving on. The "Illinois Idea" states that Pastor Fisher preached three times Sunday (May 4, 1913).

> While each sermon was truly instructive and fraught with profundity, yet the discourse to the Knights of Pythias at 3.30 was said by the leaders of that order to be the best they had ever listened to in the City of Chicago.

The preaching of lodge sermons was unusual for Olivet. The rostrum and pulpit were very sacred to the pastor, and for that reason not everybody could enter the stand. Especially was this true of secret societies, so after he defined the "bounds of their habitation" they generally preferred other churches. He was not wholly against the lodge, for he was himself an Odd-Fellow, but he made every organization subordinate to the church and used all occasions to preach the gospel.

In November he went to Oakland, California, to conduct a revival for Rev. Mr. Coleman. While there he had a chance to see the "Golden West" and to visit many churches and cities. He returned home in December to take up his work at the mighty Olivet.

Early in the spring of 1914 he was asked to pay another visit to California. It happened that this was

Digitized by Google

the rainy season and he had to be taken to church in a boat. The church extended him a call, and since his work at home was such that any minister could have carried it on, he probably would have accepted the call if his commission had read, "*Row* ye into all the world, and preach the gospel," instead of "*go*" and "preach." True, he was going to heaven by water, but not to church by boat.

He returned home to complete the work along the lines started. The prime factor in the church life was the saving of the lost and the edifying of the saints, with special emphasis on missions and outstations. The church was to take the initiative in an educational program as sanctioned by the Chicago Religious Seminary, where Christian workers could become efficient; coupled with a social and a civil service course including the teaching of stenography, dressmaking, cooking, printing, and other useful arts. Also larger and more efficient mothers' unions where practical talks would be given were planned. Along the line of organized philanthropy, the Olivet Athletic Club and Girls' Twilight League, both planned for the community, the twenty-three church clubs catering to the public, the free employment bureau, the benevolent societies of Andrew and Peter, the Standard Literary Society, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the Loyal Temperance Legion, and the two mission stations were not enough, but he had a plan for church activity caring for individuals from the cradle to the grave.

Digitized by Google

A GROUP OF WORKERS OF THE BETHLEHEM ASSOCIATION

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Fifty of the best years of his life had been spent in the Baptist church. It was honor enough for him—in fact, the highest honor a man could attain in Christian circles—to be pastor of a New Testament church. But in fellowship with other churches, in Associations, State and national conventions he did not hold aloof. Five years before he had organized the Bethlehem Baptist Association of Chicago and Vicinity, and had drawn up its rules and regulations, and he was directly responsible for its being one of the largest Associations in Illinois. He was chairman of the committee that drafted the constitution of the General Baptist State Convention of Illinois, served as one of the incorporators of this organization, and as fraternal commissioner from this body to the State Convention of Kansas, and was a member of the Executive Committee from his arrival in Chicago. He held no further office until the end of 1913. Then he was elected president and served the interests of the people to the best of his ability. He was also a trustee of the Missouri Baptist State Convention and President of the Western Baptist Convention, which was representative of all the Western States and Territories.

In national affairs he realized that the time had come to help young men to the front. At a Philadelphia meeting of the National Baptist Convention, the Rev. Sutton E. Griggs was allotted only twelve minutes to put his plea before that body. Mr. Fisher moved to extend the time of Mr. Griggs, and the speaker made

Digitized by Google

such an impression that he has never retired from the stage of national activities. By twenty-five years of persistent striving Doctor Fisher had won for himself a most influential place in that body. He served on various committees, being on the committee of the National Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention on the question of "a theological school for Negroes of the United States." Many Northern white Baptists thought that no form of cooperation should have been initiated between the National Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention. The National Baptist Convention realized that the question of property in slaves had divided the white Baptist denomination in 1845, but thought that the Southern Baptists felt that they owed the Negro a debt which they should pay. The National Baptist Convention favored giving them a chance. Pastor Fisher was also a life member, member of the Executive Board, and vice-president of the National Baptist Convention, and was one of the incorporators of the National Baptist Publishing Board, and served for ten years on every committee appointed by the Convention to determine the relations between the Board and the Convention. For over a decade it was considered his place to move, after the president's annual address, to go into the election of officers. Dr. E. C. Morris was thus always unanimously elected. It is the consensus of opinion that the Convention would have split in Philadelphia in 1914, if it had not been for

Digitized by Google

Mr. Fisher, and that it would not have made a blot on the escutcheon of Chicago in 1915 if he had lived to help in shaping the destiny of that body.

A very delicate matter had been in litigation concerning the ownership of the National Baptist Publishing House, and especially was this evident at the convention at Nashville, Tennessee, in September of 1913. The minutes of this session state that " Dr. E. J. Fisher presiding, ruled that the commission (on the matter of the publishing-house) report be referred to the committee of vice-presidents." This series of investigations as to who owned and should control the possessions of the Boards of the National Baptist Convention and the impudence of the Publishing Board were certain to involve lengthy conflicts. All of this, however, was put aside for the moment and interest directed to a National Gospel Campaign. Five field workers were appointed, and Doctor Fisher was one of the active forces in this effort to reach the unsaved and to create more spirituality among the saved. Already over ten thousand souls had been garnered into the kingdom through his instrumentality, and more protracted meetings were in view.

The Rev. S. W. Batchlar, Shiloh Baptist Church, Indianapolis, Indiana, wrote to him March 28, 1914:

My dear Brother:

I am writing to you again asking you to consent to come to Indianapolis to assist me in a ten-days' meeting. . .

L

Digitized by Google

The Baptists of Indianapolis are very badly in need of some good gospel preacher to come in here and really preach the gospel.

I do not know of a man who can do that one thing better than you. I want the people of Indianapolis to be convinced that there are some real qualified preachers among us who do know how to conduct a successful revival. The time is ripe; if you can come, you will without doubt have a great success.

Yours in His name,

S. W. BATCHLAR.

If he had desired to devote his time exclusively to evangelistic work he would have kept busy the year round. However, in spite of the growing work of a large pastorate, there is no State in the Union where Negroes are numerous in which he has not conducted revivals, and there is hardly a Negro settlement which his influence has not permeated. His last large effort was in Los Angeles, California, at the Mount Zion Church, in February of 1914. All the pastors of the city united in this effort. Standing-room was hardly procurable. The churches took on new life and many hundreds were added to them.

This result was typical of the many meetings that were held from time to time. Many thousands of souls were added to the churches. Many of these are living, doing yeoman Christian service, while many others have slept to wake no more. Great good has followed his numerous protracted meetings. There is no way to find out the exact numbers converted under his minis-

Digitized by Google

try, for as he sailed in the great sea the waves of his influence rippled far away, and left no further trace of the vessel's course other than the scores who today greet his posterity and call them blessed.

This same year he was called upon to be the religious statesman of his race in an appeal against the house bill of Congressmen Edwards and Aswell for segregating government employees.

Mr. Chairman:

I appear before you and this assembly to make a minority report on the two bills offered for the segregation of the Negro from the white race in the government employ.

In all the history of civilization the country that denied the poorest citizen equal justice has fallen. The races cannot be kept socially and economically distinct. Neither race wishes it; witness the great mulatto population of the South. A policy of segregation breeds unrest, fosters anarchy, stirs up social antagonism, and defies the ameliorating influences of Christian brotherhood. There is no white or black supremacy, only the supremacy of service to humanity. The prosperity of a nation is most secure when all elements and classes of that nation are at peace with each other. We have one God, one country, and one flag. Partisan bitterness and vengeful spirit do not develop friendly relations between the two races.

The denial of freedom in any of its phases to a race tends to develop irresponsibility in that race. Responsibility must rest upon opportunity of the human family. You cannot crush out of a race the common rights of humanity and expect that race to make the best citizens. Whatever separation comes must be an individual separation, not racial but meritorious. Let the separation be between the good and the bad, the effi-

Digitized by Google

cient and the inefficient, the industrious and the indolent, not determined by color. . . The recognition of irrational legislation by the government is the beginning of an influence that will put this nation to shame. It is as unfair to the white youth as it is to the black, to teach him that superiority is based on anything other than character, intelligence, and recognition of the supremacy of God. . .

There were two distinct civilizations begun in this country—one at Jamestown, Virginia, and the other at Plymouth, Massachusetts. One was based upon the idea of inferiority and ignorance of one class of its people and the superiority and knowledge of the other class; the other was based upon equality, freedom, and knowledge, for which we contend. The world's greatest Teacher said over nineteen hundred years ago, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." The great Lincoln paraphrased this into the statement that the country could not exist half-free and half-slave. If this segregation law obtains, the saying of immortal Lincoln must fall. The nation was humiliated at a tremendous sacrifice of her best blood. Shall we at this late date resurrect these idols that have already cost us too much, by a separation of ourselves with a revengeful sectional spirit that will be difficult to erase?

The slavery of cast and color is more galling, more intolerable, more expensive than physical slavery. Saint Paul has told us, "God has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth." Who is so ignorant today as to believe or even repeat the old superstition that the Negro is not included as a part of the "nations of the earth"? Evidently all discriminating laws are wrong. . . A nation cannot live separately within a nation. The proposed law is an inconsistency of thought, illogical and impracticable. Is it just or unjust, fair or unfair? Will it lead to the betterment of all concerned? Will it give more efficient service? Will the government profit by it? The answer to each question is,

Digitized by Google

CHILDREN OF THE KINDERGARTEN IN THE OLIVET BUS

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

No! Physically, temperamentally, and mentally there is no line of demarcation between the races. There is no ideal the Anglo-Saxon can approve that the Negro cannot attain. He has been just as brave and courageous, just as polite and intelligent, just as progressive, just as productive, and just as worthy. He has always shown the best of feeling for the government, has always been stanch and true to his country. "Servant of all" is his title. He has hewn the wood and drawn the water for others with a fidelity that is wonderful and a patience that is marvelous. As an example of patient fidelity to humble duty, he stands without a peer.

His conduct in the war that resulted in his freedom was as rare a bit of magnanimity as the world has ever seen. The helpless ones of this oppression, in his power, nobly stayed his hands from vengeance and, at last, when he held up his hands that his bands might be loosed or severed, his emancipator found them scarred with toil unrequited, free from blood of men, except that which was shed in honorable open battle. He vies with the white man in pouring forth his blood like the waters of a stream to enrich the soil, from which has sprung the great tree of liberty. Yet, sirs, we have seen him hanged from its stalwart limbs, and bound at its rugged base. His body has been murdered, but his will is unbent. We as a government have said, "Thus far and no farther shalt thou go." Shall we murder the mind, the hand, and the soul that have supported us and always borne us good-will? Shall we strike the hand that fed us? Shall we permit our brother to ask us for bread and we give him a stone?

Then he uttered a prophecy that may yet be fulfilled.

Gentlemen, if you harden the hearts of the present generation by the enactment of cruel legislation, your children and

Digitized by Google

mine will pay for it at a greater cost than that of '61-'65, in blood, in tears, in money, in misery, in sorrow, and in human life.

An address of this kind could not have been representative unless he had been gaining in popularity with the brethren. When he was a friend you knew it, and when he was an enemy you did not have to wonder as to his attitude. He had an easy adaptability that kept him in close contact with the commoner and the aristocrat, the untutored and the learned. His presence was familiar and his manner soothing. In his discussions he was logical and even waxed eloquent, and in his determination to carry conviction he was a terror when antagonized either in private or public. He had nothing that was not at the disposal of his friends. His home was the rendezvous of visiting ministers. Many a time he brought home a hungry traveler, and the mistress of the manse with less than a loaf and not a small fish in the larder, like the widow of old, would make the cake from the last of the meal in the barrel, depending upon faith as a foraging agent for the next demand. Often too has his family seen the visitor take the last roll from the tray or spear the last piece of meat from the platter, while telling of some amusing incident that happened in Georgia or Tennessee. One brother remarked that he was about starved when he met Mr. Fisher, and the meal at his home saved his life. In Conventions, Associations, Church, and State was he ever loyal to righteous men and measures.

Digitized by Google

Certainly, if there is not an agreement with all of Doctor Fisher's strivings, there must be admiration for, and faith in, him because of his convictions. To be a worker politically for the "Grand Old Party" delighted him; to labor zealously for men and measures he deemed worthy of his support, and to oppose men and measures which would tear ultimately at the very vitals of democratic government, was patriotism enough for him. Not a "hat-in-the-hand," profiteering politician who would sell his birthright to forward a selfish ambition! No! There is no record of his ever receiving filthy lucre. Not office-seeking, conniving at evil to get in touch with men doing big jobs. No! The jobs sought him.

NATIONAL TAFT BUREAU,
THE RALEIGH HOTEL,
Washington, D. C.

The Rev. E. J. Fisher,
2940 South Park Boulevard,
Chicago, Illinois.

My dear Sir:

I have been informed of the active interest you are taking in the renomination of President Taft, and beg to assure you of our hearty appreciation of your cooperation. . .

The letters and telegrams which we are receiving daily show a constantly increasing Taft sentiment, and we have every reason to believe that the President will be renominated on the first ballot.

Digitized by Google

I shall be glad to hear from you from time to time as to conditions in your State.

With very best wishes, I remain,

Very truly yours,

WM. B. MCKINLEY, *Director.*

Evidently Mr. McKinley had been informed by outside forces. In reply to the director, Doctor Fisher gave a reason for his policy.

You, Mr. McKinley, have my cooperation because of the party and chieftain which you represent. For thirty-two years I have had the interest of the Grand Old Party at heart, working with it but neither changing to the right nor to the left. I have never asked for any position in the party, only working to the finish, and supporting every measure which I was persuaded to believe was right.

After all, could a man be in political affairs and emerge untarnished? Truly, Doctor Fisher's life is an attestation. But even granting this, Was it worth while? We have only to look for names of Negroes who received special appointments under the administrations he helped to foster. Probably the Illinois administration in city and State was as favorable to Negroes during Doctor Fisher's participation in legislative affairs as that of any other city or State in the Union. No doubt the City of Chicago outstripped other places in its kindly attitude toward the Negro, and the present or recent unparallelled influx into this Northern section must be laid at the door of opportu-

Digitized by Google

nities not only in the field of economics, but in religion and politics which Chicago offers.

Such a record of service naturally attracted commendation from those who recognize and follow leadership. The two letters that follow, though possessing humorous features, illustrate the adoration and even worship and devotedness of the common people to true leadership:

Dr. Fisher, Chicago. Ill. sir

you may not remembir me I am the one who weight on you in Indianapolis Ind sir I think a man of your standing it will be a honor for me to have a presn frome you at my marrying so anything you send will be glad rece but I tell you what I wood like you send me that is a cut glass vace. I am — —

P. S. Just send anything you like I just wont a presen at my maring from the Biggest Baptis preacher in the union sure do send Just somtin if not the cut glass vace.

The next letter is interesting in the use and misuse of the term *Bishop*.

DETROIT, MICH., Dec. 2, 1914

Bishop E. J. Fisher D D L L D
Bishop Baptists of Chicago

Dear Bishop

It affords me profound pleasure to write to you. I will be in Chicago the 22 of Dec. You know Bishop you are my ideal and I highly esteem you above all the Baptists Bishops in Chicago. I desire to be in your charge during my stay in the West.

I remain yours in Christ — — —

Digitized by Google

The idiosyncrasies of Pastor Fisher easily distinguished him from that " numerous piece of monstrosity " called the public. This was true even of his noble physique, towering over six feet, at least discernible above the stature of ordinary men. He dressed extremely well. He was proud of his calling and of his position, and whenever he walked the streets his personality caused the casual pedestrian to look around to see what sort of individual he was. On Easter, especially, was it a pleasing sight to see Mr. Fisher with high silk hat, Prince Albert suit, clean linen as " spotless as a lily-white doe," walnut crutches with brazen trimmings glittering in the sunlight, en route to Olivet. To the discomfort, however, of his daughter or son accompanying him, he spoke to every passer-by, being unembarrassed when the courtesy was not returned.

In 1914 the struggle for control of national Baptist affairs was at its height. Dr. E. W. D. Isaac, Corresponding Secretary of the Baptist Young People's Union Board, wrote on October 17:

> The church supply business is gone. The copyrights have passed from us. The little Negro dolls have left us. Now the denominational paper is gone. I hope you will get busy and exert yourself concerning these matters before everything that the denomination has is gone.

Much apprehension and fierce denominational strife resulted when the Publishing Board, led by Dr. R. H.

Digitized by Google

ELIJAH JOHN FISHER
At the Age of 58

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Boyd, took, so it is alleged, properties owned by the National Baptist Convention. Although there was not an organic split, yet in sentiment there were two factions established, one led by Dr. E. C. Morris and the Convention, and the other led by Dr. R. H. Boyd and the Publishing Board. Churches and pastors lined up with one faction or the other.

In a letter to Doctor Fisher the first of December, Doctor Isaac prophetically states:

> I have contended for ten long years that a law-suit is the inevitable. I think so yet, and the quicker we have it the better for all concerned.

At every denominational gathering the fight was on. A meeting was called at Nashville for December 29, of the commissioners from the National Baptist Convention joined by representative persons of the Southern Baptist Convention for the purpose of reconciling the rebellious Publishing Board. The Publishing Board attempted to flood the commission with outsiders, hoping to create confusion and disorder and to break up the meeting.

The chairman says:

> Yours of the sixteenth instant is received. I am glad to know that you will be here on the twenty-ninth. We need somebody here who has the courage to bring things to pass. . . I will be glad to see you and to have a conference with you before the commission is called to order. It is now time for action; any further delay is dangerous, and the people whom we represent must suffer the consequence.

Digitized by Google

The controversy waxed hotter and proved helpful in correcting loose business arrangements and faulty methods that had been growing up for years and in exposing Doctor Boyd's Board in gathering to itself that for which the people had sacrified so nobly, as they thought, for themselves and for the Convention.

The newspapers were full of the conflict. A battle of pens was waged, Doctor Sutton E. Griggs upholding the Convention, and Doctor Boyd the Publishing Board. There could be no advantage gained by either side by this publicity; a peaceful settlement needed to be tried.

In a letter to Doctor Griggs, February 11, Doctor Fisher says:

> I have noticed with peculiar interest in your paper, and that of Doctor Boyd, the manner in which you write each other up before the world, and I cannot see what either of you hope to gain by so doing. Have you forgotten the old saying, "Right the day will win"? I sincerely hope that . . . every denominational paper will cease its writing respecting the *pros* and *cons* of our National Convention affairs, and let the people of God come together with hearts of love and faith in God, and all matters can be easily and peacefully settled.

Digitized by Google

IX

INTO THE HARBOR

1915

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

INTO THE HARBOR

1915

Doctor Fisher never knew that his end would come in the midst of his public brilliancy. On January 26 his church tendered him a reception at his home. His twelfth anniversary message to his church appears in the "Olivet Herald" for January 31:

To the Officers and Members with the friends of Olivet:

Beloved, it gives me great pleasure to appear before you today (January 26), to recount the labors of the past twelve years' stewardship. I was not perfect, and therefore my administration has not been perfect, but I have had a perfect pattern, which was Christ Jesus after whom I have been following day and night.

We began our work together complete strangers, one not knowing the other; and I, a Southerner, coming to you with all of my Southern traits and peculiarities, had to learn you and your ways. You also had to learn me and my ways. We began from the bottom with not a dime's worth of anything on earth save faith in God and confidence in ourselves, and agreed together to rent this basement floor for sixty-five dollars per month for two years. At the expiration of that time we arranged to purchase the building from the parties to whom the Supreme Court gave it, Charles M. Barnes of the Englewood Sash and Door Company, at a cost of twenty-eight thousand five hundred dollars, in 1905. We then let the contract for the completion of the building at a cost of seventeen thousand five hun-

Digitized by Google

dred dollars. In order that we might be able to purchase, I loaned the last cash dollar I had, which was one thousand, without one dime of interest on the same.

Our enrolment showed about six hundred names as members, and today it shows about thirty-nine hundred. The debt of forty-six thousand dollars has been reduced to less than three thousand dollars with all expenses paid to date. We have a well-organized Sabbath school with about fifty officials, a splendid Baptist Young People's Union, and a Standard Literary Society among our young people that is not surpassed anywhere in this country for its real worth. We also have a Brotherhood and Sisterhood of Andrew and Peter which takes care of the membership by giving them four dollars per week in sickness, and sixty dollars upon the day of their death—they have sufficient funds in the bank today for this purpose. We also have two missions supported by us, with seventeen other auxiliaries, making twenty-three *in toto*. We believe in the power of organization.

When I came to you there were very few persons in the church attempting to own homes. Today there are more than three hundred. Our church is making through its mission circles more than two hundred visits weekly among the people, and is furnishing help in many cases. We have been giving more than a thousand dollars a year to missions alone and several hundred for education. Our church is divided into missionary and educational groups working the year around. We also have a training-school running day and night, reaching the needs of the people, men and women. We have three financial secretaries and one regular church clerk, besides a secretary for each auxiliary. We have over fifty professional men in the church, including five attorneys, eight physicians, four pharmacists, three real estate men, nine business men and others, all of whom have united with Olivet save two during my pastorate. We have performed two hundred and forty-

Digitized by Google

five marriages, buried two hundred persons, immersed fifteen hundred persons, and our finance has not been less than ten thousand dollars annually for all purposes. Today we have on our sick list ten members.

Sisters and brethren, Rev. G. E. Duncan, my assistant pastor, deserves much credit for the loyal help he has rendered me in this work of the Lord. There has not been a single thing between him and me in our ten years of acquaintanceship. Let me thank you, every one separately, and then collectively, for the aid you have rendered in the work of the Lord. My entire board of twenty-three officers, save four, have united with the church since I have been your pastor.

Now, as our great National Baptist Convention with its two million five hundred thousand members is to convene with us September 10, let me urge you to leave no stone unturned for the members' comfort and happiness during their stay among us. "Arise, and let us go hence" (John 14 : 31).

Thanking you for the joy you added to my family, and praying the blessing of God upon you, your homes, and your friends, I beg to remain

Yours in Him, E. J. FISHER.

In this same month the Rev. C. H. Young, of Atlanta, Georgia, conducted a revival for him in which there were many converted. The anniversary occasion was also the scene of rejoicing over souls as well as other blessings that God had given to the church.

Doctor Fisher was fast breaking under incessant labors. The winters were cold and dreary, but the pastor of Olivet left his home walking over ice and through snow to church. The wintry blasts of snow coated his garments a sparkling white, numbed his grip

Digitized by Google

on the crutches, and decorated his face with frozen mixtures of breath and snow. With cloth hat pulled down over his ears, with ulster buckled around a muffled neck, and with heavy boot, the minister plied his way religiously from his warm house. During his twelve years at Olivet there were not a score of meetings, concerts, entertainments, or worshipful service in which he was not present at least a part of the time unless hindered by sickness or absence from the city.

This constant strain was severe upon his physical body, but it shows the perpetual care required of a good shepherd for his sheep. The day of the ministerial consumer who sleeps all night and half the day and rests the other half is fast passing. Probably the time will come, as it should, when along with the reports of the different workers of churches will come a report from the minister stating the amount of his activities. Such a report should show an equal distribution of hours spent in work, recreation, and rest, with an allowance of one day in seven. In the case of the Negro shepherd, he gets more of his share of work and little or no recreation and rest.

Perhaps no Negro minister of the gospel ever toiled harder, was opposed more, complained less, or accomplished more.

Some think there may have been ground for some of the opposition. Men will not submit tamely to iron-handed rule. On the other hand, human nature is so normally fallible that where men have equality of op-

Digitized by Google

portunity and office, if one person succeeds markedly above the other, jealousy and its sequel, opposition, come from many, if for no other reason than to attract attention from their own incapabilities.

If Doctor Fisher's ambition was to be the leader of the Baptist forces in the Gateway to the Middle West, indeed it was a laudable one, the logical result of his position as pastor of the mother church. He fought a victorious fight against all who dared usurp his prerogatives. He had built his work with a will indomitable. He never pastored a split, and no church dared split under him. He was pastor of his church, so he said, " from the pulpit to the backdoor and to the grave-yard." But he would rend any Association or Convention if he believed his views to be right, and that such a course would advance God's kingdom.

Conspiracies were formed by many to hurt the influence of Olivet, and even a " Union " was organized to pass on the eligibility of churches to receive aid from the white Baptists. This " Union " tried to eliminate him and Olivet as factors of power with white Baptists. However, the white brethren considering Olivet stronger than the combined churches of the " Union " would follow no policy that did not include Olivet. The organization remained in existence two years, but did not succeed.

Doctor Fisher never lost a battle, but the energy used in fighting could have been conserved if men had taken time to understand him. The thing that told

Digitized by Google

most on his life was the opposition of those men who had lived on his bounty. He continued to labor in his course despite the accumulation of every form of persecution. Venturing on the Providence of God in making an experiment in the Northwest at a time when the results were problematical, he had been useful in converting thousands to Christ. He is not permitted to witness the triumph of the system which he did so much to inaugurate, but he did see that even churches which did not wish to cooperate with him, relied in a large measure upon his methods for their increase in power and usefulness. When the memory of his antagonists will be forgotten or remembered, chiefly, because of their antagonism to him, the church with which his name and life are associated will continue to operate as a potent factor in hastening the latter-day glories of the Lord. This is not an idle prophecy. It is being fulfilled today. The Olivet Baptist Church stands today the most vital moral force in the Negro race and the largest Protestant church in the world, with the Rev. Dr. Lacey Kirk Williams, pastor, used mightily by God.

Ah! But the story might have been different and the end might have come sooner had it not been for Pastor Fisher's angelic wife. She was expected to retail to her husband grievances of some weakling too prudent to bring his trouble directly to the pastor, but she was too thoughtful to do that. She knew full well the agonies of suffering her husband had to endure

Digitized by Google

HOME CARE OF THE SICK CLASS
Olivet Baptist Church

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

without heaping further burdens on him. His restless nights told of his burdens and of the tales of weal and woe poured into his soul; of the mournful recital of family troubles; of the ingratitude of children recalled from hazy memories; and of personal grievances made out of trivialities. "You have plenty," wrote a prominent clubwoman, dissatisfied because Pastor Fisher did not announce her business,

> and should remember that you get a great deal of it by grinding it out of humanity. . . You happen to strike one that does not have to live on the unfortunates, and you are not capable of advertising me either. . . I have lived in Chicago twenty-three years, and succeeded in business and have made openings through our business for others to succeed in the same line. What have you done?

The faithful wife read scores of other letters of abuse and disappointment. But who made his life as happy as it was? The mistress of the manse! Who kept Doctor Fisher from resigning and made him resigned? Who wiped away the frowns of fortune, and who with winsome kiss coaxed smiles to his ebony cheeks? Mistress of the manse, "Mary in the house of God, a Martha in her own," mother, woman, let Ruskin sing of you! "Such helpmeets you are that no man can stand without that help nor labor in his own strength."

The work night and day was wearing Doctor Fisher out. On the fourth of January his friend, Dr. S. L. M. Francis, pastor of the Providence Baptist Church and Dean of the Chicago Religious Seminary, died.

Digitized by Google

The result of his death on Doctor Fisher can hardly be estimated. He took a much needed trip for rest the middle of March, but whenever he was known to be in a town he was marshalled into service. While in Cincinnati for rest his life-long friend, the Rev. Samuel S. Sisson, compelled him to preach. He carried on a revival for Mr. Sisson, but the death of one of his stanch workers necessitated his coming home.

CINCINNATI, March 29, 1915.

My dear Wife:

I am still suffering. I hope you are all well. I will leave for home tomorrow and reach there, D. V., Wednesday at 7 a. m. Give my love to the children. Sam sends love to all. He is doing well here. I hope everything goes well. I am ever

Your husband,

E. J. FISHER.

His friends and family saw the strain, but Doctor Fisher would not stop. He had an inexhaustible fund of nervous energy. His calmness and serenity of mind had a most beneficial effect in keeping him up so long. He could not rest. Some were storming his ship with blasts of opposition. He must master his fate, captain his soul, and safely anchor in calm waters. Even though a Brutus unsheathed his blade and struck a ghastly wound he yielded not. With double determination he set out to do nobler and grander works for Christ.

The first Sunday in April was Easter. He took his accustomed place, but was barely able to finish his

Digitized by Google

message. He rested Monday. Tuesday he felt revived and went to the Pekin Theater in an effort to put Mr. Oscar DePriest over as the first Negro alderman in Chicago, and Mr. DePriest was elected. It is pleasant, as well as beautifully characteristic of Doctor Fisher, to recall that the illness threatening his life did not diminish the endeavors so nobly begun in behalf of others. In the course of his address he swooned; he was taken to a near-by drug-store where he regained consciousness.

Wednesday, his wife thought it best to send him to Provident Hospital for a rest. Mr. Fisher for two weeks seemed to be getting along finely, and his physician, Dr. U. G. Daily, allowed him to come home. He remained indoors for two or three days, improving splendidly.

The news of the illness of Doctor Fisher spread like a mighty conflagration to every corner of his acquaintanceship.

April 26, 1915.

On receiving the sad intelligence of your illness, the Baptist Ministerial Alliance of the City of Indianapolis, Indiana, by unanimous vote in assembly, authorized the secretary to write you and family this letter in which it does hereby express the heartfelt sympathy of the entire brotherhood of the City of Indianapolis and the State of Indiana at large. . .

We are praying, and have prayed, if it is the will of God, that you may immediately recover and once more be able to reoccupy your pulpit.

Rev. G. L. LILLIARD, D. D., *Pres.*
Rev. F. L. MORRIS, A. B., *Sec.*

Digitized by Google

DES MOINES, IOWA, April 25, 1915.

Dear Brother:

I am sorry to hear that you are sick, and I hope that you are so much better now as to be well on the road to recovery.

I suppose this accounts for my not hearing anything further from you regarding the program for the Western Convention.

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

T. L. GRIFFITH.

OKLAHOMA CITY, May 17, 1915.

My dear Friend and Brother:

Some weeks ago I was advised that you were ill but that you would be up and out shortly. I take it that you are now again at home and sufficiently convalescent to receive mail from your friends and those who always wish you well.

H. HARRISON.

Despite the seeming improvement of Doctor Fisher, it was not quite clear to the household that he could get the desired rest in Chicago. It seemed that a trip to Indiana would put him in good order. Accordingly he went to Gary to spend a while at the home of Rev. Mr. Hawkins, for whom he had lifted the first spade of dirt for a church building. After two weeks he came home showing only a few signs of any sickness. Many were the duties that should have come to his attention during the interim.

The Lincoln Jubilee, celebrating the Half-century Anniversary of Negro Freedom, was soon to take

Digitized by Google

place at Chicago, and he was one of the five men appointed on the Commission by the Mayor of Chicago to represent the city. The president of the celebration, Bishop Fallows, wrote him on May 7:

Dear Doctor Fisher:

I am glad to know that you are gaining rapidly every day. I am free to say that I have been sounding your praise at home and abroad as one of the most useful preachers and leaders of your race.

When I think of the past and the struggles of your early life amid the conditions in which you were placed, and the present exalted position you occupy today, I think we all ought to say, "What hath God wrought."

As the secretary has informed you, the final preparation for the convention cannot be done until we can have your physical cooperation. You know the tremendous importance of this work. We are therefore hoping that your recovery will be speedy and complete, and that the work will go forward to a complete success.

With best wishes, believe me,

Very sincerely yours,

SAMUEL FALLOWS, *President.*

In like manner the controversy of the National Baptist Publishing House and the property holdings depended very largely upon his maneuvers. The Hon. William Harrison, attorney for the Convention, writes, May 17, from Oklahoma City:

Everything has stopped and awaits your return to the wheel and your wise guidance and your almost unerring counsel. My

Digitized by Google

entire family is solicitous about you and yours, and all fervently pray for your entire recovery and your invaluable service for many revolving years yet.

Indiana seemed just the place for recuperation. He liked the region so well that he went back again. Seemingly he was recovering from the mental strain of work. Telephone calls and letters brought messages of a cheering vein. Unfortunately the message was wired to Gary that Deacon Peter Wimby had passed away and that the funeral had taken place. Brother Wimby had been Doctor Fisher's companion ever since he came to Chicago. Deacon Wimby was a strong character, one of the founders of the Bethlehem Association, a pillar in Olivet for years and its treasurer. The reaction caused Mr. Fisher a backset.

Doctor Fisher stayed a week longer in Gary, and after a few days or so his wife received a note bearing the statement that he was feeling fairly well and that he would be home shortly. How well he was could not be discerned from the letter; and almost before the note was in the hands of his wife he came home. His physique was as strong-looking as usual, but his countenance bore the expression of wrinkled care. Mr. Fisher's condition was disclosed only to the intimates of the family and to the officials of the church. The letters from the family to those solicitous for the welfare of Doctor Fisher were always full of hope, giving encouragement to others which was not always fully shared by them.

Digitized by Google

Students whom he had helped in one way or another were very loyal and proved friends. Mr. Shishuba, a native African, whom the church was helping through Roger Williams University, Nashville, Tennessee, writes: "I have learned from my President, Doctor Townsend, that he found you in bed sick while he was in your city. I am praying for you to get well."

Probably there was none more deserving of help or who had a greater future for usefulness than the Rev. Mordecai Johnson, then a student in the Rochester Theological Seminary. He had free access to the library of Doctor Fisher and to the rostrum of the church. Time and again was he the speaker at the Sunday services, and often spent his summer vacations in charge of the Olivet congregation.

MUMFORD, N. Y., May 21, 1915.

Dear Doctor Fisher:

I have learned that you are ill but trust that now you are on the road to recovery. I pray that you may soon be well and at your work again. . .

I still remember with gratitude your very kind interest in me. I trust that your interest continues, and that I shall be able to prove myself worthy of it.

My kindest regards to Mrs. Fisher and to your sons and daughters, all of whom I hope are well.

Again let me express the hope that God may help you to health and renewed usefulness.

Your younger brother in Christ,

MORDECAI W. JOHNSON.

Digitized by Google

For two or three days Pastor Fisher was able to walk around in the house and read, but he was not able to touch any of the duties of his pastorate. He did not realize his condition, but the presence of so many doctors and the many visitors that thronged to see him indicated that his sickness was not of the ordinary kind.

He was able to be up so long as he could manipulate his crutches. But about the middle of May his strength left him, and he did not sit up as was his custom. Helpless, weak, unable to talk plainly, he remained in his room from the middle of May on. His condition was growing worse each day. The family at home was very anxious and wrote to the youngest boy (the author of this volume), then in Morehouse College: "We wrote you that your papa had a nervous breakdown and at first did not know how serious, but he is getting worse all the time; we want you to come and see him before it is too late."

The lad easily imagined the peril of his father by the letter. Immediately leaving college he reached Chicago in time to receive an unforgetable benediction. In a voice hardly distinguishable and with words barely understandable, with hand in hand and hearts of both throbbing rapidly, this question was understood:

"Son, how did you do in college?"

"I did my best. I led my class and school and received the first scholarship for next year."

. . . . .

Digitized by Google

The look of favor was benign. A Sabbath stillness reigned. After a few minutes he uttered as best as he could his benediction.

With tears in his eyes he said, " God bless you, I knew you would do it." But he had not finished; he was trying to utter more. Words could be distinguished to say: " You asked me before you left what I wanted you to be. May God help you to be a man. If you fail me I am lost."

The tired traveler turned over to rest. He tried to hide from sight his realization of the fact that he was fast approaching heaven, his harbor of rest. The family was borne down because of the critical condition of the head of the house. Added to this Mrs. Fisher received the sad intelligence from her sister in La Grange, Georgia, that her mother had passed. About a week later Miles got his leg broken in an athletic contest. The burden on the heart of Mrs. Fisher was lightened by the kind assistance of friends who showed in a large way their love for the family.

> There is a comfort in the strength of love;
> 'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
> Would overset the brain or break the heart.

It was a fact that even if the recovery of Doctor Fisher was a certainty, some time would be needed for rest. Thereupon the Olivet Church and the family requested all correspondence for the forthcoming National Baptist Convention be directed to the Rev. I.

Digitized by Google

A. Thomas, of Evanston, Illinois. Dr. E. C. Morris, President of the Convention, endorsed this suggestion in a letter to the family and enclosed the following note:

HELENA, ARK., June 5, 1915.

My dear Doctor Fisher:

This leaves me well and I hope you are much improved. All matters are moving smoothly now, and we are planning for a great time in your city in September.

You know that I am always glad to hear from you and when you are better you may write.

Very truly, your friend,

E. C. MORRIS.

The cheerful tone of the following four extracts gave greater encouragement to the family than was warranted by the facts. President John Hope, of Morehouse College, wished to be remembered kindly to Doctor Fisher. Writing to his wife, he says, "I am sure if he were well, he would be in Georgia this week with the great Baptist host which I hope will have a harmonious union."

AUGUSTA, GEORGIA, June 22, 1915.

My dear Doctor:

Having heard of your illness I am writing to express my sincere wish and prayer for your complete and speedy recovery to health. Our entire convention (General Missionary and Educational Convention of Georgia) at Macon, Ga., a few days ago, passed resolutions of sympathy and had special

Digitized by Google

BOY SCOUTS
Olivet Baptist Church

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

prayer for your recovery. I trust you are being sustained by the promises of Christ, and by the comforting influence of the Holy Spirit in your affliction.

Remember me most cordially to the members of the family.

With best wishes, I am

Sincerely,

C. T. WALKER.

His sister, Sarah, says: "The people are so anxious about him, both white and colored. I was there Saturday to Doctor Ridley's (the younger). They desire to see him."

Dr. S. J. Williams, associated with him for many years in State work and then pastor of the First Church, Cairo, Illinois, wrote:

I pray for you and your great work, and trust that the Lord will restore you to health. I have asked my church and people to pray for you and Olivet, for we need you and your good people to help us carry on the work of the Master's kingdom.

The truth of the condition of Doctor Fisher was that he rested quietly from day to day, but his wrinkled forehead and nervous tension showed that he was in pain and agony. The breath of July, like hot furnace air, added to his discomfort. Specialists were called in, a trained nurse was ministering to him night and day, prescriptions were filled plenteously, but to no avail. However, this did not trouble him, for when his voice was clear as a clarion, and when his muscles re-

Digitized by Google

sponded like bands of steel, with lungs of brass and bowels of copper he had proclaimed that

those who have laid hold of the hope that is set before us in the gospel have entered "the glory of the immortal life," where

> "O'er all those wide extended plains
> Shines one eternal day."

The Spirit in the Word has cheered us during our weary pilgrimage with the promise, "Thine eyes shall . . . behold the land that is very far off." At the grave we can stand beside the dust of our departed friends and think that

> "Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
> Was not spoken of the soul."

Nay, but the rather, "This corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal shall put on immortality."

This thought had been a potent factor in all the efforts of Doctor Fisher even before its proclamation by him; and though the doctor, nurse, and prescriptions could do him no good, fifty-one years before his case had been diagnosed by the Good Physician, the remedy had been prepared in the pharmacy of heaven by that same hand that had created earth and every living thing, and the "balm of Gilead" had been applied to his heart by the Holy Spirit.

He continued through the days of July in a state of consciousness. The monotony of the days was broken by the songs, "Jesus is All the World to Me" and

Digitized by Google

"I Am Happy in Him," by his daughters. No one was allowed to see him.

The curtain of death which was occasionally lifted during the two months and a half of confinement was drawing closer and closer. As he sank into delirium that last day of July, with a smile of "Well done," he seemed transported with the most ardent impatience to join the society of saints redeemed through his own instrumentality. The dark shadow which for hours had been hanging came nearer; the sun was slanting her golden rays to the West as a symbol of ended day. That dear life was hanging low, and at three hours and a quarter past the noon life ended here but began there.

The funeral services, simple but impressive, were the fitting sequel of the life lived. Flowers gathered from many climes, telegrams and letters of sympathy from rich and poor, lay and clergy, white and black, were only the sad and pronounced echoes of an earthly loss and heavenly gain. The words of the apostle Paul, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith," were used by the Rev. Dr. C. T. Walker as a fitting tribute to this soldier of the Cross. The multitude that had waited all night at the church, the prayers and hymns that wailed plaintively even to heaven, the tributes paid by men prominent in every walk of life, seemed to chant a refrain, "Yes, soldier, you have fought a good fight and kept the faith." The funeral procession left lonely the

Digitized by Google

hearts of the people. A short committal by " Father " Duncan, a brief prayer to the Maker of men, forever ended the earth-voyage of the weary mariner. His soul had entered heaven's port—" Safe home at last." The log-book of his life will be fully read when the books are opened before the Great White Throne.

FINIS

Digitized by Google

APPENDIX

OLIVET BAPTIST CHURCH

1915-1922

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

OLIVET BAPTIST CHURCH

1915-1922

Elijah John Fisher's work was done but, like John Brown, "his soul goes marching on." One of the finest tributes that can be paid to his labors, is that for nearly a year after his decease the work of Olivet continued in harmony, as peaceful and efficient as during his own lifetime. Even with empires, the death of a monarch is sometimes the occasion for disruption, but not so with the Olivet Church. It strengthened its position, adding over four hundred members during the year.

Undoubtedly one factor which tended to preserve the unity of the church was the faithful, untiring, energetic work done by the late minister's daughter, Miss S. Mattie Fisher, now one of the church missionaries under appointment of the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society. If it is not too anticipatory, it is timely to remark that the present pastor has shown a kindly interest in Doctor Fisher's family in many ways. For example, he was largely instrumental in having a monument to the memory of the late Doctor Fisher placed in Mount Forest Cemetery, and favors the present monthly allowance of the church to the late minister's widow.

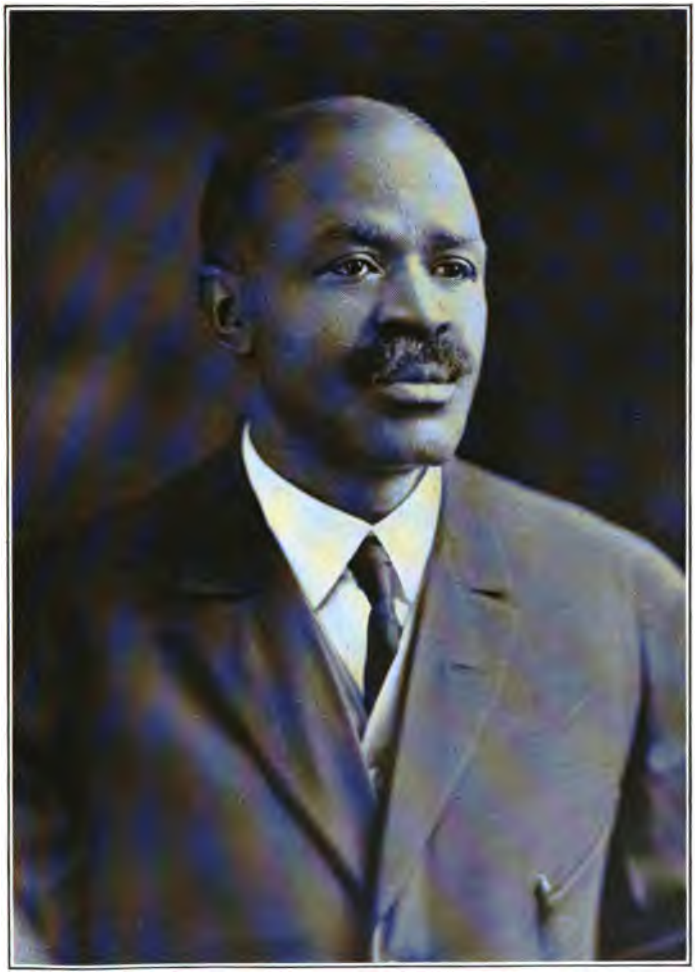
Digitized by Google

If a division in the church was possible, the psychological background was there in the schism which resulted in the formation of the National Baptist Convention (incorporated), led by Dr. E. C. Morris, and the National Baptist Convention (unincorporated), led by Dr. R. H. Boyd, in the annual meeting in Chicago in September, 1915. Olivet had invited the Convention to be her guest and made a great effort to entertain it, but since the only man in the denomination that could have averted a schism had passed, a division was inevitable.

This event did not, however, stop the work of the church so successfully managed by Chairman Griffin and his Official Board and "Father" Duncan, the devout assistant pastor, long past "three-score years and ten." It rather stimulated the church to outlive the event that was unfortunate for the denomination, and that put the Baptists of Chicago in an embarrassing position.

The church then liquidated every sign of debt and called the Rev. Lacey Kirk Williams, D. D., of Fort Worth, Texas, to lead her. The church at that time had over four thousand members, owning a meeting-house valued at $85,000, and operating three mission stations in needy parts of the city. Besides this, the church had eight paid workers, twenty-six departments, and two hundred and sixty officers. The congregation believed, and rightly too, that Doctor Williams could keep the Olivet machine oiled and that he

Digitized by Google



LACEY KIRK WILLIAMS, D. D.
Pastor, Olivet Baptist Church, Chicago

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

had inventive genius to add more parts to the machine that Jesse F. Boulden, Richard De Baptiste, Henry Harrison White, John Francis Thomas, and Elijah John Fisher had tried in various ways to bring to perfection.

Rev. Mr. Williams was the first college- and seminary-trained man Olivet ever had; he was a graduate of Arkansas Baptist College with the degree of Bachelor of Arts, and of the theological course of Bishop College, and was honored by Selma University with the degree of Doctor of Divinity. For over twenty years he had been the successful pastor of many churches in the larger cities of Texas; he had built five houses of worship, the last of which, the Mount Gilead, of Fort Worth, cost $90,000. Doctor Williams also served as president of the Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention of Texas for twelve years. This organization had espoused the cause of The American Baptist Home Mission Society in a way similar to that of the General Missionary and Educational Convention of Georgia mentioned in Chapter III, and it was expected that the pastor-elect would sustain relations between the Olivet Church and the white Baptists of Chicago. Lacey Kirk Williams, the seventh pastor [1] of the Olivet Baptist Church, was in-

[1] Jesse F. Boulden was the first pastor of the Olivet Baptist Church, but it is known that the organization had form before his time. A Negro Baptist church existed in Chicago some time before October, 1848, but it was not until April, 1853, that the Rev. Robert J. Robinson came from Alton, Illinois, and organized the Zoar Baptist Church, of eleven mem-

Digitized by Google

deed the man who many hoped would also unite the Negro Baptists of Chicago.

In addition to the sad intelligence that the Baptist constituency of Chicago was estranged, one of the first things that came to the attention of Pastor Williams was the fact that Negroes were migrating to Chicago so fast that the city threatened in a short time to rival the Negro centers of the South. The emigration of the foreign element and the almost stoppage of immigration impaired the war industries of the North. The industries sent a call to the South for labor, and Negroes seeking adventure and economic, educational, social, and political advantages responded.

When Olivet saw that Negroes were coming North, and coming to stay, and that many of the poorer emigrants had no idea what city life was like or who would receive them or where they would stay, she was

bers. The Rev. H. H. Hawkins, of Chatham, Canada, West, the first permanent pastor, served the church from 1855 to 1858. The church was next pastored for seven months by the Rev. David G. Lett. In March, 1860, about forty members withdrew and formed the Mount Zion Baptist Church; Rev. Mr. Boulden, pastor. The Zoar Church, after the secession, probably had for her pastor Rev. Mr. Tansbury, who after remaining a short time went back to Canada. After this, through the influence of the Rev. Jesse F. Boulden, the two bodies were reunited into the Olivet Baptist Church, December 22, 1861. The pastors of the Olivet Baptist Church have been: Jesse F. Boulden (1861-1863); Richard De Baptiste, D. D. (1863-1882); James Alfred Dunn Podd (1882-1883); Henry Harrison White (1883-1886); John Francis Thomas, D. D. (1887-1902); Elijah John Fisher, D. D., LL. D. (1903-1915), and Lacey Kirk Williams, A. B., D. D. (1916-). For a detailed account see the author's "The History of the Olivet Baptist Church of Chicago" (A. M. thesis, The University of Chicago).

Digitized by Google

especially active in securing homes and employment through her information and employment bureau about which many migrants had heard through an advertisement carried in the columns of one of the Negro weeklies. Hundreds of prospective migrants sent letters to "Oliver," "Ovlivet," or Olivet for information. Some wrote for passes; others simply said, "Meet me at the station." One wanted "a suitcase to put his things in." The following letter from Hawkinsville, Georgia, tells another pathetic story:

March the 26—1917.

My Dear frends i have seem yur in Striction of members of the race coming from the South We will pree shade yu offer in coming north We all are not able to come But our dezire is to come Heep of us ant got the money to come with Some of the peope of the race are unable to go they Kneed help to come We wants to come We think yu peope for help We are Poor class of Peope and wants help to come with and think yu all Please to help we poor class of the race if we can get off as Soon as we can get off for times is getting Bad hear we wants to leve hear Befor we cant leve So give my love to all howdy and good Bye Just a frend rite soon as possible to

— —.

Scores of these immigrants united with the Olivet Church each Sunday. Other churches were strengthened too; the membership of five churches was increased to nearly five thousand, but the phenomenal increase of Olivet was the direct result of her wide

Digitized by Google

popularity and the preparation of her pastor and members for the incoming thousands.

The increase of the Olivet membership was so large that the main auditorium seating about eighteen hundred, the lecture-room holding about eight hundred more, and the Dearborn Street Annex which had been used for a kitchen and dining-room, were all used for worship, and yet there were hundreds turned away. Another building opposite the church on Twenty-seventh Street was secured to be used as a kitchen and dining-room, and the two upper stories fitted up for a Working Men's Home.

It was evident that Olivet needed more room. When the First Baptist Church desired to sell her meeting-house, Olivet was asked to buy the property. True enough the building would provide accomodation for about three thousand persons,[2] but Pastor Williams was not anxious to take over the property. The church even voted not to buy it. It was the ambition of Doctor Williams to build a tabernacle in Chicago, and as a result he proposed to the Baptist Executive Council of Chicago that if some of the smaller congregations would unite and take over the property, Olivet would contribute $3,000 to the same. The reply was that no arrangements could be agreed upon with any Negro Baptist organization except Olivet. Whereupon the

[2] The First Church edifice was designed by architects Wilcox and Miller to seat in the main auditorium, 1,500; in the Sunday school room, 900; and in the lecture-room, 530.—"The Standard," October 29, 1874.

Digitized by Google

MARCHING FROM OLIVET TO THE FIRST CHURCH

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

church voted to buy the property for $85,000, the price offered by a Methodist organization. The Baptist Executive Council gave the church $15,000 of the amount. This act of Olivet and her pastor put the Baptists far in the lead of any other denomination in Chicago, set a widely copied precedent for the buying of church property, reopened relations between the white and colored Baptists of Chicago, and virtually vindicated the position of the late pastor in respect to the " Union " mentioned in the previous chapter.

The Second Sunday in September, 1918, was the day the First Church was turned over to the Olivet congregation. It was an unforgetable day when the membership met in the old church home, formed a line of march that paraded out State Street to Thirty-first Street, and thence east to South Park Avenue, singing as they went, " Onward, Christian Soldiers."

The gray stone building, with its gothic towers, one rising one hundred and sixty feet, its sides divided with buttresses and large stained- and cut-glass windows, made the most pretentious Baptist meeting-house then in the city. Its gallery amphitheater and semicircular black walnut pews, with incised holly panels and tops and arms veneered with root ash, were just part of the interior arrangements which made the total initial cost of the building $111,000. Now the keys of that grand, historic building were turned over to Olivet. But Olivet had been in the minds of the people that worshiped there ever since the building of the edifice.

Digitized by Google

At the laying of the corner-stone, Saturday afternoon, June 5, 1875, the pastor of Olivet, the Rev. Richard De Baptiste, made a short address along with other city ministers. Furthermore, Dr. W. W. Everts, pastor of the First Church, spoke wiser than he knew at the dedication in April, 1876, when he preached from Genesis 35: 3: "And let us arise, and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went." Nor did the evening message of the Rev. J. N. Murdock, D. D., of Boston, fall short of the program of world vision of the First Church or of Olivet when he used Psalm 67 : 1, 2 as a text, saying: "God be merciful unto us, and bless us; *and* cause his face to shine upon us; Selah. That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations."

Olivet, from the first, accepted the earthly challenge of the modern message. In order to know the needs of the field, a religious survery, extending over several months, was begun. The worker would enter each home with the statement:

> We are making a survey of the district in order to find our people, because we wish to establish for them a community center in the church at Thirty-first Street and South Park Avenue. In the interest of the work we are making a house-to-house visit to all the people of the community, asking the names of the adults in the house, their Christian connection, their occupation, how long they have been in the city, and the

Digitized by Google

number, ages, and sex of their children. In this center we have a kindergarten, information, and free employment bureau, clubs for boys and girls, meetings for mothers and fathers, and many other helpful organizations. Will you give us this information?

In this way over five thousand homes were reached, and direct contact between the church and community was made vital. From such a survey it is easy to see how in four years 62,000 visits were made to sick and needy persons, and 986 of them aided.

In patriotic effort Olivet was no less responsive. She paid $5,000 cash for Liberty Bonds of the second series. More than one thousand of her members subscribed for Liberty Bonds of the third series. Moreover, Pastor Williams was given an indefinite leave of absence for religious work in Camp Grant. The church was open at all times as a war center, encouraging patriotic addresses and exercises, entertaining soldiers, and housing the Red Cross Committee. Olivet donated thousands of pieces of religious literature to soldiers at Camps Grant and Dodge, and a communion set to the latter training-station.

As the Olivet Church contributed her share in making the war successful, so the war inspired her to do big tasks. For example, in the course of four years, the total collected and spent for community service, church improvement, education, evangelism, and missions amounted to $141,322.36. The greatest financial feat accomplished by any known congregation of color was staged on August 29, 1920, at which time over

Digitized by Google

$18,000 in cash was laid on the table, making a financial effort of only a few weeks total more than $29,000. This was accomplished through the wise judgment of Pastor Williams, who took advantage of the high labor returns, knowing that Negroes contribute seventy-five per cent. more of their wealth for church purposes than does any other race.

During the Chicago riot the Olivet Baptist Church was the headquarters of the Peace and Protective Association, an organization composed of the leading Negro citizenry, which met daily for thirty or forty days, counseling sanity and peace and giving defense and aid to needy and innocent riot victims. Thus it is evident that Mr. Williams did not only talk of the golden streets of the by and by, but of the dirty, crooked highways and byways of now and here.

The divine worship of the church is not neglected; every Lord's Day at eleven o'clock in the morning preaching services are held in the main auditorium, the Sunday school room, and the lecture-room of the church. Rev. Mr. Williams is himself a thoughtful, forceful, orthodox, interesting, and emotional preacher. In one sermon he satisfies the intellectual élite, he convinces the skeptic, and he electrifies the washerwoman. An extract of his sermon on the "Quest of God" (Gen. 32 : 29) will serve to illustrate his style:

> Philosophers have given much thought to the study of God, and after their searches and researches many gave him the name of First Cause, the Great Unknown.

Digitized by Google

Homer called him Zeus, having his permanent abode in Mount Olympus, which trembled when he stamped his feet or nodded his head. The Romans called him Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury, and ascribed to these gods the powers and some of the attributes that we ascribe to our God. The Northmen called him Odin and Thor; the Egyptians, Isis and Osiris, or Typhon; while other nations gave him other names. Abraham, David, and Moses, when they first saw him called him a man, for they saw him walking and talking, or striving with them as man would with man. When he commanded Moses to go and tell Pharaoh to let his people go, Moses inquired what was his name, for he knew that would be the first question Pharaoh and the children of Israel would ask. And to Moses he said, Tell them my name is, "I AM." A personal, self-existing Being! . .

Tell me thy name, thou that fillest all space, inhabitest the sea, dwellest in the loneliness of the mountains, soarest up to heaven, and keepest vigil in hell. . . Thou that knowest all, and hast the wisdom of the deep, of the blinking stars, and blinding suns, of rocks and rivers, landscapes and grottoes, I want to know thy name. Thou that has power so that none can hinder thee, so that none can prevail against thee, so that thou askest none for bread, or what course thou wilt pursue; thou that findest the cause and power of thy existence within thyself, that rulest all, that hast never failed in any engagement, nor got tired in any undertaking—"Tell me, I pray, thy name." . . Thou, the secret and nameless One of my existence, the Source of my fears, the Object of my hopes and faith, the Inspiration of my life, the one animating and indescribable Impulse within me, I hear thy voice when I am alone and in the dark; when none else is there, thou art. I feel thy touch, I have received thy aid; when my own imaginations have failed me, when my resources are exhausted, when I need protection in the crucial moments of my life, when I stand face

Digitized by Google

to face with emergencies, when I have felt insecure, and tormenting fears have crept over me, when the attributes of the flesh offer and hold no comfort for me—tell me, Who art thou that comest with the gentleness of the dew and the power of a God and rescuest me?

It is putting the fact conservatively to state that about thirty-five hundred people throng to hear this preacher each Sunday, and yet hundreds of the membership go to other churches because they can not gain admittance at their own. Since 1916, seventeen hundred and ninety-seven persons have been added to the church by baptism. In the fall of 1918 a great revival was held, at which time the Rev. S. E. J. Watson, D. D., of Topeka, Kansas, but now of the Pilgrim Baptist Church, Chicago, was the preacher. More than eight hundred souls were added to the church. The same year the number of persons received by Christian experience, letter, and baptism was twenty-six hundred and seventy. At this writing, approximately one out of every fifteen Negro residents of Chicago is a member of the Olivet Baptist Church; the enrolment is ten thousand and twelve, a group as large as the combined constituency of the ten leading churches of the Chicago Baptist Association,

The Sunday school has thirty-one hundred pupils enrolled. In addition, there is a children's church which meets each Sunday morning.

All of the work has been accomplished by Pastor Williams and his assistants: the Rev. George Duncan

Digitized by Google

until he died, March 11, 1918; the Rev. Joseph H. Branham, his successor, a good preacher and a wonderful associate; the Rev. Joseph C. Carroll, and three or four ministerial students from the University of Chicago. There are in all, thirty compensated workers and eight hundred and sixty church and departmental officers in charge of fifty-five departments.

The church owns a lot at Thirty-eighth Street and Prairie Avenue, now used for athletics and summer chautauquas, an automobile bus, costing $2,600, which brings children to and from the kindergarten, old and decrepit members to worship, and gives recreational rides to needy convalescent members, soldiers, and others. The Day Nursery and Working Girls' Home, located at 3144-3146 Vernon Avenue, cost $8,250 without equipment. The total property valuation is estimated at $250,000; the income for last year was $89,000.

The Olivet Baptist Church is a reminder of the capacity of the Negro and a timely rebuttal of the statement that Negroes are incapable of self-government. The white Baptists of the North have not failed to recognize the ability of Doctor Williams nor to accept the leading position of the Olivet Church. On several occasions Pastor Williams, himself a keen student of the relation of the races, has been asked to speak before white groups. With much ability he has lectured at numerous churches, and before the Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, the Divinity School

Digitized by Google

of the University of Chicago, the Illinois Baptist State Convention, and the Northern Baptist Convention. His church takes delight in permitting him to serve in this capacity as well as in lending his influence to needy places of the race. He has recently conducted successful revivals in St. Louis, Kansas City, Peoria, and Omaha. In the last named place, the influence of Olivet is so great that Pastor Botts of the large First Church, designed his meeting-house after the Olivet structure. Olivet would have long since gone to seed had she been self-centered and anti-missionary. She progressed because she performed her duty. Her medical missionary, Dr. Robert M. Sissusa, labors in Liberia, West Coast, Africa; and, as a matter of fact, throughout all of the Northern territory, from the many struggling churches in Chicago, which Olivet has helped, to the outstanding congregations in the Northwest, there is hardly a place where the influence of the Olivet Baptist Church and Pastor Williams has not permeated.

It is not to be wondered at that, in a position so conspicuous and with a reputation so far-reaching, Doctor Williams has much opposition. Yet he remains unperturbed though very sensitive to accumulating criticism and hostility which is chiefly political.

Unlike his predecessor, Doctor Williams tries not to be partisan or to ally himself with any political faction. It is hard at this period of political history to determine with what faction the former pastor would

Digitized by Google

THE OLIVET BAPTIST CHURCH
Thirty-first Street and South Park Avenue, Chicago

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

ally himself. We know, however, that his last efforts were spent in support of Mr. De Priest for alderman under the ticket vouched for by the Hon. William Hale Thompson, Mayor of Chicago. Doctor Williams has never attended a political meeting, and it is not certain that he is a party to any faction. Because of this attitude, a newspaper, which many believe is supported by the " organization," continually attacks him and his church. The prime motive for these attacks is to increase the circulation of the paper and to " bring into line " the Olivet Church which has too much influence, they say, not to be controlled by any one faction.

Then there is another yellow journal whose editor, a candidate for the United States Congress, felt slighted when he was not invited to speak at the chautauqua of the church held in the summer of 1919. His animus was further kindled by the fact that Doctor Williams advocated Negroes joining, where possible, the unions of organized labor in preference to the one of the " would-be congressman " which, in addition to other things, could in no wise keep down race friction.

It does seem that since Doctor Williams is not for the Thompson machine in its entirety, nor for " Parkerism," he is sympathetic with the faction in which Ex-governor Lowden played so conspicuous a part. Probably not because of this altogether, but on account of the ability of Mr. Williams as a leader of

Digitized by Google

men he was named by the Governor as member of the Race Commission during the riot that occurred in Chicago.

Whatever may be said concerning the opposition that tried hard to estrange the people that met at the two houses of worship, Doctor Williams proved the master of the situation. Afterward the church sold the meeting-house at Twenty-seventh and Dearborn Streets to the Liberty Baptist Church, of which the Rev. D. W. Bowen is pastor. Another result of the opposition is that it strengthened the church and solidified it for work as a religious, political, and social organism.

With all this, the splendid accomplishments of the church could not have been achieved without sympathetic friends and financial aid. The Elizabeth McCormick Memorial Fund is furnishing help to develop a free clinic for the undeveloped children of the kindergarten and day-nursery. The local Red Cross provides two nurses who give regular instruction to classes in nutrition and in the home care of the sick. A certificate is given to those who successfully complete the course. About $18,000 in cash has been contributed by the Baptists, not counting the salaries of the head of the kindergarten and of two of the three church missionaries which are paid by the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society. Members of this society and of The American Baptist Home Mission Society, together with the city ministers, meet in an

Digitized by Google

advisory board with Doctor Williams and his workers to plan the activities of this great institutional church. The following is the weekly program of the church:

SUNDAY

6.30 A. M.	Sunrise prayer-meeting.
9.30	Sunday School.
10.30	Morning worship; preaching in three places.
11.30	Children's Church.
12.00 P. M.	Loyal Temperance Legion.
	Lord's Supper each first Sunday.
3.30	Missionary program each fourth Sunday.
	Missionary program of the junior society each fifth Sunday.
	Standard Literary Society.
5.00	Herald or Cabinet meeting.
	Junior B. Y. P. U.
6.00	Senior B. Y. P. U.
7.45	Evening worship.
8.30	Ordinance of Baptism each first Sunday.

MONDAY

2.00 P. M.	Junior Missionary Society.
	Senior Missionary Society.
8.00	Social Service Committee.
	Young Ladies' Cosmopolitan League.
	Ministers and Christian Workers' Bible School.

Digitized by Google

TUESDAY

7.00 P. M.	Boy Scouts.
7.30	Young Men's Social Unit, second and fourth Tuesdays.
7.45	Girls' Community Guild.
	Day-nursery and Community Club, first and third Tuesdays.
	Woman's Christian Temperance Union, first and third Tuesdays.
	Sisterhood, second and fourth Tuesdays.
	Brotherhood, second and fourth Tuesdays.
8.00	Ministers and Christian Workers' Bible School, Tuesday before the fourth Sunday.

WEDNESDAY

7.30 P. M.	Circle Meetings—The Pastor's Aid, Wide Awake, Calvary, Queen Esther, Galilee, Helping Hand, Metropolitan, Olivet, Progressive, Providence, Royal, Good Will, Willing Workers, and Victory Circles.

THURSDAY

10.00 A. M.	Missionary Art and Needle Craft.
2.00 P. M.	Community Mother's Meeting.
7.30	Prayer-meeting.

FRIDAY

7.30 P. M.	Sunday School Teachers' Meeting.
	Choral Class Rehearsal.
8.30	Sunday School Teachers' Training-class and Bible School.
	Young Men's Baraca Class.
	Overflow Choir Rehearsal.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google